

A black silhouette of Barack Obama's head and shoulders is painted on a light-colored, textured wall. A red mark, resembling a bloodstain or a tear, is painted on the wall just below the neck of the silhouette. Another red mark is visible further down the wall.

OBAMA NATION?

US Foreign Policy One Year On

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One Year On

Dr Nicholas Kitchen
Editor, IDEAS Reports



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When Barack Obama took office in January 2009, he used his inauguration speech to carefully downplay the sense of hope that he had stoked throughout his election campaign and which his historic election represented. Few Presidents had entered office with so many areas of American foreign relations considered crucially important, or with expectations so high among foreign governments and publics. At the same time the overriding importance of domestic economic issues, and the pressure from his own Democratic supporters to capitalise on his mandate for change to enact comprehensive healthcare reform, meant that the chief challenge in his first year would be to avoid disappointing too many people.

Yet the President has been nothing if not ambitious in the scope of his attempt to remake United States foreign policy. Asked to describe the 'Obama doctrine' in April, the President responded that whilst the US remains powerful, it is only one nation, that other countries have good ideas too, that other countries represent different cultures and histories, and have their own interests. The contrast between the exceptionalism of Madeleine Albright, who considered the United States the 'indispensible nation' that sees 'further into the future', or George W. Bush, who proclaimed that America is a 'nation that serves goals larger than self', was clear: indeed, it is difficult to imagine such a limited definition of American grand strategy passing the lips of any President since the early days of Franklin Roosevelt's administration.

This Special Report, launched on the anniversary of Obama's inauguration, seeks to determine how successfully US foreign policy has been reconfigured around this more limited conception of American strategy. The President's first year in office has certainly impressed some: such was the impact of Obama's rhetoric that mere months after taking office the new President was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 'his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.' The Nobel Committee's recommendation reflected widely-held hope for a new beginning in the United States' relations with the rest of the world.

The authors of the report address the issues that were marked 'urgent' in the President's inbox as he entered office last January. They seek to assess how the new administration has gone about recalibrating its positions and relationships, and to analyse both the difficulties involved in doing so and the forces driving the revision of American strategy. It is, of course, a picture of mixed success, but in every area the ambition of the new administration is striking. In 2010, the world remains transfixed by how far Barack Obama will be able to achieve those ambitions. ■

The End of Leadership? - Constraints on the World Role of Obama's America¹

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INTRODUCTION

It is appealing to think of the Obama administration as a return to normalcy after the deviance, unilateralist arrogance and damaging mistakes of the Bush years. In this view, we should expect a return to business as usual, with the US picking up the signature themes of multilateralism and the market that have underpinned its world role since the end of the Second World War. Although by no means universally loved, the US was an effective leader through the Cold War and beyond not only because it promoted liberal economic and political values that were attractive to many others, but also because it was prepared to bind its own power in multilateral rules and institutions sufficiently that its followers could contain their fear of its overwhelming power. Does Obama's liberal stance mean that we should expect a return to the leadership role that the US has exercised for more than half a century? I argue that this is unlikely to happen because there are now three powerful constraints that will largely block a return to US leadership. The first is that the US has lost much of its followership. The second is that the capacity of the US to lead is now much weakened even if it still retains the will to do so. The third is that there is a general turn within international society against hegemony and therefore against the global leadership role itself.

LOST FOLLOWERSHIP

If the US remains willing to lead, will anyone follow? There are two issues here: the growing range of policy disagreements on specific issues between the US and others; and the decline of shared values and visions between the US and its former followers. A good symbol of the weakening relationship between the US and its followers is the replacement of talk about 'friends and allies' or 'the free world' with a much harsher and still basically unchanged, line about 'coalitions of the willing'. There is some hope that under Obama differences over policy might improve in specific areas, particularly the environment, but even on that issue Obama will be lucky just to get the US seen as not part of the problem. Domestic constraints on carbon pricing and accepting binding international standards will make it difficult for the US to lead. Many other areas of disagreement remain, some deep. The

US has failed to make the war on terrorism into anything like the binding cause that underpinned its leadership during the Cold War, and its policies continue to erode its liberal credentials. By its use of torture, and even more so the public advocacy of such interrogation techniques by senior Bush administration figures, and by its rejection of the Geneva Conventions on prisoners of war, it exposed itself to ridicule and contempt as an advocate for human rights. That China is still plausibly able to criticise the US on human rights and environment issues is a marker of how far Washington's reputation has fallen. US policy in the Middle East, particularly on Israel, has few followers, and the repercussions of the disastrous interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to rattle on. Unless China turns quite nasty, the inclination of many in the US to see China as a challenger to its unipolar position is unlikely to attract much sympathy. The financial chaos of 2008-9 has undermined Washington's credibility as an economic leader.

Anti-Americanism, though obviously not new became exceptionally strong under Bush, and is now more culturally based, and more corrosive of shared identities. It questions whether the 'American way of life' is an appropriate model for the rest of the world, and whether the US economic model is either sustainable or desirable. It looks at health; at a seeming US inclination to use force as the first choice policy instrument, with its domestic parallel of gun culture; at the influence of religion and special interest lobbies in US domestic politics; at a US government which was openly comfortable with the use of torture and was re-elected; and at a federal environmental policy until recently in denial about global warming; and asks not just whether the US is a questionable model, but whether it has become a serious part of the problem. While some of this was specific to the Bush administration, and is being turned around by Obama, some of the deeper issues are more structural. The US is much more culturally conservative, religious, individualistic, and anti-state than most other parts of the West. America's religion

and cultural conservatism and anti-statism set it apart from most of Europe, where disappointment with Obama is already palpable. America's individualism and anti-statism set it apart from Asia, where China is anyway disinclined to be a follower. This kind of anti-Americanism rests on very real differences, and raises the possibility that the idea of 'the West' was just a passing epiphenomenon of the Cold War. The Bush administration asset-stripped half-a-century of respect for, goodwill towards and trust in US leadership, and it reflected, and helped to consolidate, a shift in the centre of gravity of US politics. The Obama administration cannot just go back to the late 1990s and pick up from where Clinton left off.

LOST CAPACITY

In addition to having less common ground with its followers the US also has less capacity, both material and ideological, to play the role of leader. The rise of China, and also India, Brazil and others, means that the US now operates in a world in which the distribution of power is becoming more diffuse, and in which several centres of power are not closely linked to it, and some are opposed. In this context, the Bush legacy of a crashed economy and an enormous debt severely constrain the leadership options of the Obama administration. The economic crisis of 2008-9 not only hamstrung the US in terms of material capability, but also stripped away the Washington consensus as the ideological legitimiser for US leadership. The collapse of neoliberal ideology might yet be seen as an ideational event on the same scale as the collapse of communism in 1989.

Since the late 1990s, and very sharply since 2003, the US has in many ways become the enemy of its own 20th century project and thus of its own capacity to lead. Not surprisingly this has deepened a longstanding disjuncture between how the US perceives itself and how the rest of the world sees it. The deeply established tendency of the US to see itself as an intrinsic force for good because it

¹ This paper is mainly extracted from Barry Buzan, 'A Leader Without Followers? The United States in World Politics After Bush', Global Policy Institute Pamphlet No. 6, Forumpress, July 2009.

stands for a right set of universal values, makes it unable easily, or possibly at all, to address the disjuncture between its self-perception and how others see it. Self-righteous unilateralism does not acquire legitimacy abroad. To the extent that celebrations of US power as a good in itself (because the US is good) dominate American domestic politics, this does not inspire the US to seek grounds for legitimating its position abroad. A contributing factor here is the US tendency to demand nearly absolute security for itself. The problem for the US of transcending its own self-image is hardly new, but it has become both more difficult and more important in managing its position in the more complex world in which the US is neither so clearly on the right side of a great struggle, nor so dominant in material terms. It is unclear at this point whether Obama will be able to transcend this aspect of American politics, though it is clear that the nature of American politics makes it difficult for any president to do so.

THE TURN AGAINST HEGEMONY

The third constraint stems not from any particular characteristic of the US, but from the fact of unipolarity itself. Since decolonisation global international society has developed a growing disjuncture between a defining principle of legitimacy based on sovereign equality, and a practice that is substantially rooted in the hegemony of great powers. The problem is the absence of a consensual principle of hegemony with which international society might bridge this gap between its principles and its practices. A concentration of power in one actor disrupts the ideas of balance and equilibrium which are the traditional sources and conditions for legitimacy in international society. This problem would arise for any unipolar power, but it connects back to the more US-specific aspects of the legitimacy deficit. Under the Bush administration, the US lost sight of what Adam Watson calls *raison de système* ('the belief that it pays to make the system work'), and this exacerbated the illegitimacy of hegemony in itself. Since the US looks unlikely to abandon its attachment to its own hegemony, this problem is not going to go away.

If hegemony itself is illegitimate, and the US now lacks both the capabilities and attractiveness to overcome this, what lies on the near horizon is a world with no global leader. Such a world would still have several great powers influential within and beyond their regions: the EU, Russia, China, Japan, the US, possibly India and Brazil. It would also have many substantial regional powers such as South Africa, Turkey and Iran. Whether one sees a move towards a more polycentric, pluralist, and probably regionalised, world political order as desirable or worrying is a matter of choice. In such a world, global hegemony by any one power or culture will be unacceptable. Obama may hasten or delay the US exit from leadership. But the waning of the Western tide, and the re-emergence of a more multi-centred (in terms of power and wealth) and more multicultural (albeit with substantial elements of Westernization) world, mean that hegemonic global leadership whether by a single power or the West collectively is no longer going to be acceptable. The question is whether such a new world order can find the foundations for collective great power management, and whether the US can learn to live in a more pluralist international society where it is no longer the sole superpower but merely the first among equals. ■

Redefining the Global War on Terror?

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At the heart of the fresh approach to foreign policy promised by President Barack Obama was the repudiation of his predecessor's approach on the issue that had dominated the administration's rhetoric after 9/11, the global war on terror. Thus, one of the principal themes of Obama's campaign for the presidency had been that the threat posed by al Qaeda to the United States did not necessitate or justify the previous administration's departure from America's commitment to uphold basic international norms on torture and the treatment of prisoners. He repeated his commitment to a change of course in his inaugural address in which he stated: 'we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals'. Further, on his very first day in office, he issued four executive orders that represented a clear break with the policies of the Bush Administration. The operation of military tribunals at Guantánamo Bay was suspended, while the new administration undertook to close the detention facility itself within a year. Torture was outlawed in an order headed 'ensuring legal interrogation'. The same order required the closure of the secret prisons that had been operated by the CIA. Another order set up a wide-ranging review of detention policies introduced to meet the threat of terrorism.

And to underline still further the change in approach, the very term, global war on terror, fell out of use. Thus, Vice President Biden's major speech on foreign policy in Munich in February made no reference to GWOT or even a war on terrorism. In March, the administration came up with alternative language to describe America's engagement in two wars as a result of decisions that the Bush Administration had made after 9/11. As various news outlets revealed, a memorandum circulated within the administration in March recommended use of the term, overseas contingency operations, in place of GWOT. These changes prompted a strong reaction from a leading figure in the Bush Administration, former Vice President Dick Cheney. He accused the Obama Administration of jeopardising the security of the United States and running the risk of another attack like that of 9/11. He complained that Obama's policies amounted to returning to the law enforcement mode of fighting terrorism, which he saw as inadequate to meeting the threat posed by al Qaeda to America.

In terms of a spectrum of counter-terrorist approaches, the law enforcement mode, which can be labelled more simply as criminalisation, occupies a middle point in the spectrum with suppression and accommodation at its opposite ends. The term, suppression, can be used to describe the 'no holds barred' approach that relies on military action and the suspension of the normal legal safeguards for suspects in its treatment of detainees. By contrast, at the opposite end of the spectrum, accommodation involves tackling terrorism by addressing the grievances seen to motivate and to sustain the resort to political violence; i.e. in terms of the metaphor of the guerrilla as a fish in water, draining the swamp

to deprive terrorists of willing recruits. Each of the approaches has limitations. Suppression is commonly faulted as leading to actions that are disproportionate and indiscriminate in their impact. Criminalisation tends to be criticised as a strategy of containment that relies on the legal system to punish perpetrators after the event. Accommodation may be seen as appeasement and in its assumption that legitimate grievances are at the root of terrorism it can be regarded as encouraging any group with a grievance to resort to violence. Also the solutions offered under the rubric of accommodation tend to be long term in nature and so do not in any event offer an answer to imminent threats.

While a particular government may rely predominantly on one of these approaches, in practice, even governments that are committed to suppression, for example, may acknowledge from time to time the relevance of dealing with the underlying conditions that give rise to support for organisations engaged in terrorism. Thus, periodically during his tenure in the White House, George W. Bush mused on the connection between poverty and terrorism and acknowledged the relevance of measures designed to counter extremism though altering the social conditions in which it thrived. Similarly, the sharp break with the policies of his predecessor that Barack Obama established at the outset of his presidency has been followed through, though by no means entirely consistently. Thus, Obama not merely persisted with the predator drone programme that killed large numbers of innocent bystanders in its efforts to assassinate particular individuals in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but stepped up the attacks. The inconsistencies are partly a product of the pursuit of diverse objectives that have sometimes proved conflicting, but they have also partly been a product of the administration's response to events.

By emphasising due process and the rule of law, President Obama sought to restore America's reputation after the damage done by reports on conditions at Camp Delta at Guantánamo Bay and the pictures that had come out of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. He also took initiatives to give a larger role to diplomacy and negotiations in the conduct of American foreign policy as a further departure from the unilateralism of the Bush Administration and its single-minded reliance on military force to secure its objectives that had so alienated America's allies. Most notable in this respect was the speech that Obama gave in Cairo in June.

In it he called for the ending of the cycle of distrust that had arisen between America and Islam. He declared: 'I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based on mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based on the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive; and need not be in competition'. He underscored the need for 'violent extremism

in all its forms' to be confronted and in this context defended the American mission in Afghanistan. At the same time, he emphasised that American action to defend itself should be 'respectful of the sovereignty of nations and the rule of law'. He also spoke eloquently of the need for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And he signalled his readiness to engage in negotiations with Iran 'without preconditions and on the basis of mutual respect'.

But Obama's capacity to move forward on any aspect of the agenda he set out in Cairo proved very limited in practice. Opposition to his objectives from the parties to the conflicts played a part in his difficulties, but events in the second half of 2009 also helped to make a mockery of his hopes. Paradoxically, Bush's lack of interest in negotiated settlements had left regional powers free to explore the possibilities for progress in dialogue with their adversaries without the fear that America would seek to influence the outcome. The assumption that Obama would give priority to negotiations over the use of force gave governments facing insurgents the incentive to pre-empt the pressures for negotiated deals by taking military action to shift the balance of power in their favour, as Israel sought to do in Gaza and as Sri Lanka did with greater success in its conflict with Tamils nationalists.

Flawed elections in Iran and Afghanistan undermined the immediate relevance of diplomacy in either case. The suspect counting of votes in Iran ruled out dialogue with the regime in Tehran, in view of its evident lack of legitimacy in the aftermath of the elections. By contrast, Karzai's weakness as a result of his regime's involvement in widespread electoral malpractice and the increased possibility that it might succumb without external support to a resurgent Taliban pushed Obama into accepting the option of shoring up the regime through the dispatch of a further 30,000 American troops. This was after lengthy debate in Washington on the request of General McChrystal for a substantial increase of forces to counter the Taliban, debate prompted in part by the war's growing unpopularity both because of the scale of American casualties and the reputation of

the Karzai government. To justify his decision President Obama adopted rhetoric scarcely less reductionist than that of his predecessor. He spoke of Afghanistan and Pakistan as the epicentre of violent extremism posing a direct threat to the United States itself and linked the mission in Afghanistan explicitly to the objective of destroying al Qaeda.

To add to Obama's difficulties, two events occurred that provided further ammunition for rightwing critics of his approach to the threat of terrorism. The first was a shooting at an army base in Texas. On 5 November, Major Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire on soldiers awaiting medical examinations. He killed 13 people and injured 30 others. The attack resembled previous 'lone wolf' murders, such as the massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007 or the attack on an Amish school in 2006. But there was one significant difference. On the basis of his crying out 'God is great' and the subsequent uncovering of jihadist influences on his life, he was judged to be more politically than personally motivated, prompting descriptions in the media of his behaviour as not merely an act of terrorism, but a frightening new form of terrorism. It thus became possible for this event to be represented as an indication of the country's vulnerability to international terrorism rather than as another example of the threat posed to the American public by psychotic individuals due to the country's lax supervision of firearms.

The Fort Hood shootings were followed by the attempt on Christmas Day of a Nigerian passenger to down a Detroit-bound jet by detonating explosives he had smuggled on board. The failed attempt bore a close resemblance to that of Richard Reid, the shoe-bomber who attempted a similar feat at the end of December 2001 on a transatlantic flight bound for Miami. But as more details emerged about Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab's

Yemeni connections, as well as the existence of previous warnings about his activities, critics seized on the administration's initially relatively relaxed reaction to the episode to attack Obama's approach to combating terrorism, with Cheney accusing him of pretending the country was not at war. The critics were assisted by alarmist media coverage that sought to make the most of a story in a quiet period for news.

What Obama's first year in office underscores is the difficulty for any administration radically to change a country's foreign policy. The results of his efforts bear out the well-established realist proposition of continuity in foreign policy, though it might be more fashionable to make the same point in terms of the theory of path dependency. However, it might also be argued that the expectations of radical change were always misplaced, considering that Obama campaigned for the presidency as a centrist. Admittedly, Obama's Cairo speech hinted at more radical possibilities than would have seemed conceivable under any of the other serious candidates for the presidency in 2008. But the members of the committee who awarded Obama the Nobel Peace Prize on the strength of Cairo and some of his other speeches did him no favours.

The reward for their presumption was an acceptance speech that showed no willingness to challenge the American mainstream, portraying America as a selfless force for good in virtually all of its dealings with the outside world over the years. His only somewhat double-edged concession to critics of American foreign policy was to acknowledge that when America acted in an arbitrary fashion it 'undercut the legitimacy of future interventions'. To label Barack Obama 'George W. Obama', as some bloggers have done, goes too far. But whether in practice Obama is able to make a great deal of difference to American foreign policy in 2010 will depend on a much more favourable set of circumstances than he was presented with in 2009. ■

Obama's Middle East Policy: Time to Decide

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President Obama came into office with a clear international priority: fixing America's faltering Middle East foreign policy. With two ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a disaffected Middle East, the continuous simmering terrorist threat, disenfranchised allies, emboldened regional rivals and the perpetually floundering Israeli-Palestinian peace process, this was a mammoth task. Alongside the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the incoming president's Middle East goals focused on: rebuilding America's soft power and standing in the region; engaging immediately in a more even handed way in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and lastly, devising a more pragmatic and realist strategy to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions.

After a year in office no major breakthrough has occurred. Iran is still pursuing nuclear technology, prospects for an Israeli-Arab peace are unrealised and, while anti-Americanism in the region seems less pronounced than under Bush, the threat of terrorism is still alive and well. Perhaps it would be Pollyannish to hope for progress after only 12 months and this article will not seek to sensationally or prematurely grade Obama's achievements. Instead it seeks to provide an assessment of whether during his first year of presidency, Obama has effectively laid the groundwork for future policy successes, simply prevented an explosive situation from getting worse or actually overseen a regression in the region.

IT'S SOFT POWER, STUPID

Seven years of Bush's 'War on Terror', with its divisive rhetoric, misguided war in Iraq and unlawful treatment of prisoners left America's reputation in the Middle East in tatters. Recognizing that the US had exhausted its reserves of soft power, a key Obama priority once in office was to replenish them. The language of the new administration sought to show Middle Eastern leaders and the Arab street alike that Washington was now keener to listen than to lecture.

The first visible shift of the Obama presidency was in its rhetoric. Determined to reach out and re-engage with the Arab and Muslim world, Obama gave his first interview as president to Al-Arabiyya, an Arab satellite station. In a revealing passage, he pointed out that part of his new job was to "communicate the fact that the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world, that the language we use has to be a language of respect". The President reiterated this message with even greater effect during his Cairo speech a few months later where he repeatedly quoted the Koran and called for a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims".

Alongside this change in rhetoric, Obama sought to redefine the parameters of the 'War on Terror' and how this should be fought. Rather than fighting a nebulous war against worldwide Islamofascism, America would now be engaged in a clearly defined war against a "far-reaching network of violence and hatred", as Obama labelled Al-Qaeda in his inaugural speech. The focus has shifted to a counter insurgency/counter terrorism campaign in Afghanistan, rather than pursuing an open ended war against terrorism which was sending ripples across the Middle East.

Furthermore, forceful strategies of democracy promotion abroad were shelved whilst respecting human rights at home was emphasised. During his first weeks Obama symbolically issued executive orders requiring the closure of the Guantanamo detention camp along with banning torture and enhanced interrogation techniques. These moves were intimately tied with his desire to re-establish America's international legitimacy and restore its capacity to lead by example. Rather than bullying Middle Eastern countries into democratic reform as was Bush's want, Obama adopted a more hands off approach. 2009 saw silence from the White House during Iran's post-election protests, limited intervention in Lebanon's parliamentary polls and the adoption of narrower military objectives in Afghanistan rather than ambitious democratization goals.

Yet a shift in rhetoric can only go so far in rebuilding US credibility in the region. The Muslim world continues to scrutinize the President's actions as much as his speeches. 24-hour news channels broadcasting images of US troops still fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza, serve to undermine any message of reconciliation. Obama's quiet abandonment of democracy advocacy, highlighted by recent congressional cuts in democracy and governance aid for Middle Eastern states, similarly risks increasing cynicism towards the administration's new approach. Whilst Bush's democracy promotion at gunpoint was detested, the Obama administration's continued support for unpopular dictators such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, its propping up of Mahmoud Abbas' legally-questionable presidential mandate extension, and the near-farcical acceptance of Hamid Karzai's fraudulent re-election in Afghanistan have dampened any Muslim optimism Obama may have earned in Cairo.

Moreover, recent events have shown the fragility of the new administration's rhetorical shift. Under pressure from Republican critics after the attempted Christmas Day Detroit flight bombing, Obama vowed to, "...use every element of our national power to disrupt, to dismantle and to defeat the violent extremists who threaten us, whether they are from Afghanistan or Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia; or anywhere..." He might be able to persuade liberal supporters back home that this is not a return to Bush's neo-conservatism, but such language will not endear him to a Muslim world increasingly doubting the authenticity of his rhetoric.

Obama is burdened by the weight of expectation of a Muslim world who hoped he would not only reverse the hostility of the Bush years but somehow surpass

previous US leaders in the Middle East. The reality they face, that Obama has simply returned to the realism of previous administrations, is a bitter pill to swallow. Whilst a foreign policy success in the Muslim world could still consolidate the raised expectations of his Cairo speech, the longer they must wait, the more Obama is in danger of squandering this newly earned soft power.

THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS: TREADING WATER

It was widely hoped that one such success could be in Israel-Palestine. Seen as a keystone to defusing tension in the Middle East and improving America's regional standing, Obama has wasted no time in tackling the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, while the Clinton and W. Bush presidencies waited several years before confronting the problem, Obama engaged from day one. His first international phone call as President was to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, immediately followed by calls to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah II of Jordan. On his second day in office he named George Mitchell, famed for his successful role in the Northern Ireland peace process, as Middle East special envoy.

Obama has struck a more realist tone than previous administrations in his dealings with Tel Aviv, seemingly recognising that unconditional support for Israel, and its continued occupation and settlement expansion of the West Bank, is not in the US's national interest. Seeking to pursue a more even handed approach to the peace process, Obama has pressured and cajoled the Netanyahu government to abandon its continued construction of illegal settlements. Such constant US pressure mounted on the reluctant Israeli prime minister has seen relations between the two heads of state sink to a surprising low over the past year.

Yet despite this astute recognition of the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama's interest has not produced results. Israel's intransigence, assisted by its sympathetic US lobby, has forced the White

House to a stalemate on settlement freezes. At the same time, the embattled Palestinian Authority (PA) has weakened further. Abbas, already discredited by his embarrassing reversal on the Goldstone report investigating the Gaza War, followed Obama's line on settlements as a condition to resuming peace talks. Having taken a stand, the Palestinian leader is now unable to climb down on the issue, yet Israel will not resume negotiations until he does, effectively freezing the peace process.

Meanwhile Obama has proved unwilling to address the estrangement of Hamas from the PA, leaving all attempts to reconcile the two Palestinian factions to regional proxies like Egypt. Despite the poverty in Gaza brought on by the damage of the 2008/9 conflict and continued blockade, Hamas remains firmly in power and looks soon to enhance its appeal should the proposed prisoner exchange for Gilad Shalit go ahead. Though Obama may have committed renewed energy into resolving the conflict, he has proved unwilling to sacrifice long-standing sacred cows such as engaging with Hamas or exercising real, financial, pressure on Israel.

Whilst some might accuse Obama of naivety in his assessment of these long-standing problems he has also been unlucky. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is arguably at the most fractured it has ever been. The Palestinians are no longer represented by a single viable body, but by two bitterly divided factions, one of which the US considers illegitimate. In Benjamin Netanyahu and his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman the White House faces one of the most intransigent governments Israel has ever had. Some could argue that the relatively minor concessions already won, the partial settlement freeze and hypothetical acceptance of a future Palestinian state is achievement enough for Obama's first year given the hand dealt to him.

If 2009 has seen Obama frustratingly tread water, in 2010 the President will need to decide if he wants to do more than simply appear to be engaging with the peace process. Whilst renewed shuttle diplomacy and confidence-building measures between Abbas

and Netanyahu could yield minor developments, Obama will need to enforce major sacrifices on each side to make real progress. George Mitchell has recently mooted the withholding of loan guarantees from Israel to pressure Tel Aviv into action, a technique used successfully by George H W Bush in 1991 to push Yitzak Shamir to the Madrid Peace Conference. Yet beyond this, it is unlikely that the more controversial options, such as engaging with Hamas, will be considered. Alternatively Obama might choose to sideline the Palestinian track and sponsor an Israeli-Syrian peace, as has been quietly considered following a comparative softening of Washington's attitude to Damascus in the last year. Having been fought to a stalemate, Obama must assess whether he wants to prepare for a second round or leave things in stasis whilst focusing his energies elsewhere. As analyst David Aaron Miller cynically states, "He doesn't need Arab-Israeli peace to be considered a consequential president."

TESTING A NEW WAY FORWARD WITH IRAN

An even bigger shift has taken place in US foreign policy towards Iran. Obama abandoned Bush's one-dimensional confrontational stance, which had achieved little or nothing, preferring a multidimensional strategy of 'diplomacy, punishment and containment'. Numerous and unprecedented overtures have been made to Teheran, such as the inaugural speech's famous "extended hand", in order to find a diplomatic solution to the nuclear impasse. While finally engaging with Iran, the new US administration also sought to revive international momentum against nuclear proliferation and multilateral support against Iran's nuclear ambitions in forums such as the UN.

Yet the new President has not been naïve. With time running out, Obama recently argued in his Nobel Peace Prize speech that the international community should increase its pressure and enforce sanctions that can "exact a real price" and are "tough enough to actually change behaviour". Parallel to threatening sanctions, his administration has devised a clearer containment strategy. First, deciding to shift the deployment of the European missile shield in favour of strengthening a Middle Eastern missile defence system designed to better intercept Iran's capabilities. Second, by admitting publicly the possibility of extending a 'defence (i.e. nuclear) umbrella' over the Persian Gulf in the event of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

Complicating this strategy have been the internal struggles within Iran emerging from the disputed summer Presidential elections. Obama's quiet immediately after the Iranian election suggested he hoped protests would subside allowing him to continue his diplomatic engagement with Tehran. As opposition continues, Obama has felt compelled to break his silence, most recently, "condemning the violent and unjust suppression of innocent Iranian citizens," during the Christmas period. On the one hand, Obama knows that any overt public support for the opposition could taint their cause allowing Tehran to portray them as foreign puppets and initiate an even harsher crack down. On the other hand with President Ahmedinejad's government being increasingly stubborn on nuclear negotiations, possibly as a consequence of these internal struggles, US policy makers are aware that an opposition victory might produce a government more willing to negotiate, though perhaps not the pro-Western fantasy that some of its foreign supporters envisage.

Yet waiting and hoping that the opposition triumph and are then willing to negotiate more favourably on the nuclear issue is unpalatable and risks Israel acting alone, possibly with Saudi Arabia's tacit support, to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities. Obama has already threatened "consequences" should

Ahmedinejad reject the latest deal, and, with Tehran ominously silent as the New Year deadline passed, the White House will be under pressure to initiate a new round of sanctions. There remains uncertainty, however, as to what impact sanctions could have. Will they entrench the regime as in Saddam's Iraq? Could they embolden the opposition further or simply provide greater justification for Tehran's crushing of them? Would they actually succeed in halting or delaying Iran's nuclear program or destroy any hopes for cooperation, whilst Tehran becomes even more determined to defy the West and develop the bomb?

Of all the challenges Obama faces in his second year, Iran is expected to be the most pressing. Despite exploring a host of options, including international cooperation, diplomatic engagement and even talking the language of world-wide nuclear disarmament, Obama seems no closer to reaching a settlement with Tehran. He has been unfortunate once more in trying to apply a pragmatic engagement to an Iranian regime even more defiant and confrontational, as a result of internal struggles, than that faced by Bush. The White House is aware of the imprecise science of sanctions, but may find its hand forced into action as the lesser of two evils when compared to an Israeli military strike that could ignite a regional war. Whilst all options remain on the table, the pressure on Obama to produce results will only increase throughout the year.

TIME TO DECIDE

When it comes to foreign policy Obama has proven not a bleeding-heart idealist but a shrewd pragmatic realist with Nixonian echoes. Nowhere has this been more evident than in his Middle Eastern policy: abandoning the democratising rhetoric of Bush, scaling down Iraq, providing limited military objectives for Afghanistan and against Al-Qaeda, opening up to rivals and pressuring allies when this was considered in the national interest.

This pragmatism drove Obama's initial efforts at rebuilding America's soft power in the Muslim World, for which he should be lauded, though any increased legitimacy earned has not been capitalised on. Now is the time for some tough decisions if Obama is to deliver results and avoid becoming a false prophet. To push forward Israeli-Palestinian peace sacred cows may need to be sacrificed such as talking to Hamas, financially pressuring Israel and restarting negotiations with Syria. To progress with Iran decisive action is needed, whether it be renewed diplomatic deals or international pressure and sanctions, that both maximises pressure on Tehran whilst minimising the damage felt by internal protestors.

After years of failures it may take just one major success for Obama to provide a snowball effect in the region upon which the White House can build. Yet the inability to deliver can only serve to increase the diminishing of newly acquired reserves of regional goodwill. Whilst a year of Obama has quelled the fires left by Bush's incendiary foreign policy, and have certainly not made things worse, the 44th President's second year needs tougher decisions if it is to reap the success he seeks. ■

Bush's War: Drawdown in Iraq

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Iraq, the central issue that destabilized George W. Bush's time in office, has provided Obama with a rare success story during his first year in the White House, whilst the US unemployment rate has proven stubbornly resistant to his bold economic policy initiatives. A major push on healthcare reform has forced this idealistic president to confront the compromising realities of doing politics within the belt way. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has openly undermined President Obama's call for a freeze on house building in the occupied Palestinian territories, in effect, removing the central plank of Obama's Middle East peace initiative. Finally, after a prolonged period of embarrassing vacillation and indecisiveness, the Obama Administration has inherited an Afghan policy that George W. Bush would be proud of. On Iraq, however, Obama has managed to successfully implement his key election promise of quickly reducing American commitment to the country, drawing down US combat forces and the money spent on reconstruction. To date, this has been achieved while politically motivated violence across Iraq has continued to drop. However, has this rare success story during Obama's first year been delivered by the new president's courage and commitment or has he simply benefited from the legacy of his predecessor and the policy initiative implemented in the last two years of Bush's second term?

CAMPAIGN PROMISES

In both the Democratic Primaries and the Presidential election, Barack Obama's policy on Iraq appeared to be unambiguous, bold and brave. It became his 'signature issue' during the primaries and clearly helped him win a decisive victory over Hilary Clinton with her more complex, if not mendacious, policy on the future of US involvement. During the election, the Iraq issue allowed Obama to draw a stark comparison with Senator John McCain. In doing so he convinced a large section of the American electorate that he could deliver peace with honour in Iraq, portraying McCain as being detached from both American and Iraqi realities. McCain was overtly criticised for simply continuing with the Bush approach, thereby tainting himself with all the problems that surrounded the president.

In contrast, Obama boldly stated that on his first day in office he would give the Joint Chiefs of Staff "a new mission that is to end this war". Obama's strict timetable for pulling out two brigades of US combat troops a month would mean that none would remain in the country by the summer of 2010. This formed the core of his plan: Turning the page in Iraq, launched in September 2007. The only caveat placed on this commitment was a "residual force" to be left in Iraq after the main bulk of American combat troops had left. Its role would be to train the Iraqi military, fight al Qaeda

and deal with the "potential re-emergence of Shia militias." For a war-weary American electorate, Obama offered a seemingly unambiguous exit, a road home from the arduous and costly Republican adventure in Baghdad that had cost so much blood and treasure.

INHERITING THE BUSH LEGACY

It can be persuasively argued that two of the policies pursued by George W. Bush from January 2007 onwards made it possible for President Obama to successfully extricate America from Iraq without the country descending into another internecine conflict. At the height of the Iraq civil war, in January 2007, 3500 Iraqi civilians were murdered in one month. This forced George W. Bush to announce a new policy, a 'surge' in the number of US combat troops and their aggressive repositioning amongst the Iraqi population. This change in US policy and troop posture resulted in a steady decline in Iraqi civilian deaths. All those organisations collating casualty figures in Iraq agree that 2009 has seen the lowest death toll since the invasion in 2003. The Iraqi government estimates that 6,772 people were killed in 2008 and 3,492 in 2009 compared with 13,896 in 2006. This still makes Baghdad one of the most dangerous cities in the world and means that more people in Iraq are killed by terrorism than any other country. However, compared with the all-out sectarian carnage of 2006-7, this decline in the death rate does represent a major step forward and has facilitated Obama's ability to rapidly reduce US troop numbers.

A second major legacy that Obama inherited from George W. Bush clearly aided his disengagement plans. On 27 November 2008, the Iraqi parliament ratified a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and a Strategic Framework Agreement. This formally codified relations between the Government of Iraq and the United States for the first time since the invasion. It was the passing of these two agreements at the end of 2008 that set the date for the end of the American occupation of Iraq.

The lengthy and at times antagonistic negotiations that resulted in the SOFA were indicative of how relations between Washington and Baghdad had been transformed long before Obama was elected. The process began in 2007, when President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki committed their respective governments to a legal agreement that would formalise long-term relations between the two countries in the aftermath of the invasion and regime change.

In March 2008, the US government sent a large team of lawyers to Baghdad to begin the negotiations. The complete rejection by Baghdad of the American lawyer's first treaty draft signified how much the US had misunderstood the transformation of Iraqi politics over the course of 2008. By the time substantive negotiations on the SOFA began in Baghdad, Prime Minister Maliki had secured his grip on power and had boosted his popular support by repeatedly playing the nationalist card. As SOFA negotiations dragged on, Maliki increasingly couched his opposition to some of its more objectionable clauses in terms of Iraqi national sovereignty. The popular approval this won him encouraged an even tougher negotiating stance. In Washington, President Bush became ever more eager to conclude an agreement before he left office, bringing a degree of closure to the

most contentious issue of his presidency. The American presidential cycle and the growing confidence of the Iraqi Prime Minister combined to give much greater leverage to Iraq. The final agreement saw the Iraqi government achieve the majority of its demands and the US were forced into making a series of significant and far-reaching concessions.

The most important concession extracted from the US by tough Iraqi negotiating was an unambiguous timetable for US troop withdrawal. The final document left no room for doubt. First, all US combat forces were withdrawn from Iraqi cities, towns and villages by 30 June, 2009. As a result American troops ceased to have a sustained security presence in Iraq and were instead redeployed to a limited number of designated bases outside heavily populated areas. Once US forces were withdrawn to these bases, the agreement gave them two and a half years to leave the country. Article 24 of the treaty states that “all US forces are to withdraw from all Iraqi territory, water and airspace no later than the 31st of December of 2011.”

The degree to which the Iraqi-American treaty, negotiated by George Bush, directly facilitated the successful realisation of Obama’s Iraq policy is indicated by the fact that the SOFA goes much further than Barak Obama’s own electoral promises. Obama’s commitment to pulling US combat troops out of the country was balanced by his commitment to leave behind a ‘residual force’ of US troops. This force of around 30,000 would train the Iraqi military, fight al Qaeda and deal with Iraqi militias. Under the SOFA however, no US troops with any combat role can remain in Iraq after 2011. A training mission is certainly permissible but a US role in actively fighting al Qaeda or the Shia militias is expressly forbidden, effectively placing major constraints on Obama’s own stated policy in Iraq.

IRAQI REALITIES

The final dynamic that has greatly aided Obama’s ability to implement his Iraq policy has little or nothing to do with the influence of US policy. Instead, from 2007 onwards, Iraqi politics have been so transformed that a US troop presence became largely irrelevant. The first aspect of this transformation was the effect the civil war had on sectarian demographics in Baghdad. Those analysts who remained sceptical about the success of President Bush’s surge instead blamed widespread population transfers triggered by the sectarian warfare that dominated Baghdad until 2007 for the reduction in violence. The Shia militias, the Badr Brigade and Jaish al Mahdi, deliberately set out to drive Sunni residents from mixed neighbourhoods and from Baghdad altogether. Estimates vary on how many people were displaced in this sectarian warfare but the US military estimates 350,000. Of these, an Associated Press survey carried out in March 2009 estimated that only 16 percent have returned to their former homes. This argument suggests that once the surge began in early 2007, the civil war had already succeeded in dividing Baghdad, driving a large number of Sunnis from the city. It is this sectarian division of the city that analysts argue reduced inter-communal violence. Thus, Obama could agree to the rapid reduction in the US troop presence across Baghdad since the Shia death squads had succeeded in creating religiously homogeneous communities. Those backing this explanation would point to an increase in bombings in March and April 2009, suggesting this was caused by the removal of a small number of security walls by the Iraqi government.

The second change in Iraqi politics that allowed Obama to reduce US troops without a return to civil war was the rapid increase in the power of the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the coherence of the Iraqi state. Nuri al Maliki became Prime Minister after months of negotiations in the spring of 2006. For the first three years, his premiership was chronically weak, beset by numerous plots to unseat him, a set of powerful cabinet ministers over which he had little control and a widespread perception that he was little more than

an American puppet. However, the extent to which Maliki consolidated power in the office of the prime minister became apparent in March 2008. Without US approval Maliki moved 30,000 Iraqi troops south to Basra to retake the city from the Shia militia, the Jaish al Mahdi. They met much stronger opposition than had been anticipated and defeat was only avoided by heavily reliance on American combat advisors and air power. However, the eventual re-establishment of government authority in Basra struck a widespread popular chord with an Iraqi population long subject to criminality and sectarian violence. Maliki went on to bolster his new found popular appeal in May 2008, by regaining control of the Sadr City area in Baghdad, the huge slum that had until then been dominated by the Jaish al Mahdi.

Maliki used this new-found Iraqi nationalism and his role as the champion of a strong Iraqi state to win the December 2008 provincial elections. He named his coalition, Dawlat al-Qanoun (State of Law), to remind the population that the Prime Minister’s policies and actions had brought increased law and order to Iraq. On the campaign trail, Maliki stressed the success of the military campaigns in Basra and Sadr City as well as his role in challenging the Kurdish Regional Government’s attempts to gain control over areas along its boundary with the rest of Iraq. In a key campaign speech, he set himself against the decentralised federal agenda championed by US Vice-President Joe Biden and damned the policies of key US allies in Iraq, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and their partners in government, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Amongst a generally fractured and diverse result, this statist and nationalist approach saw Maliki’s coalition win the largest slice of the popular vote in nine out of the 14 participating provinces. Once the seats were allocated, State of Law won outright majorities in both Baghdad and Basra. It only failed to win Sunni-dominated Anbar, mainly Sunni Salah Al-Din, Shia-dominated Karbala, and the mixed provinces of Diyala and Nineva.

The increasing confidence of Prime Minister Nuri al Mailki and his assertiveness in negotiating a

very favourable Status of Forces Agreement with the United States indicates how Iraqi politics were transformed in the final eight to twelve months of George W. Bush’s presidency. It is this transformation and the dramatic reduction in violence across the whole of the country that has allowed President Obama to successfully pursue his Iraq policy in a comparatively trouble-free way. Obama’s electoral platform on Iraq was indeed bold and unambiguous. It allowed him to distance himself from the myriad foreign policy failures of George W. Bush whilst portraying his rival for power, John McCain, as both detached from the mainstream of American domestic opinion, offering little more than a continuation of previous Republican policy.

That Iraq has given Obama one of the few policy successes of his first twelve months in office is somewhat ironic. Success in Baghdad has been largely built upon decisions taken by his predecessor and the actions of Iraqi politicians, Nuri al Maliki amongst them, over which the new President has had little or no influence. If Iraqi politics continues to head in a positive direction over what is left of Obama’s first term, then the President’s good fortune begins to look like astute political planning. However, if violence starts to increase in Iraq and if the national elections scheduled for March this year do not go well, then Iraq will be once again be thrust onto the centre stage of American politics. Then Obama, who has greatly benefited from his predecessor’s policies, is in trouble as he appears to have little by way of contingency planning if things do not continue to unfold in a comparatively benign fashion. ■

The Right War?

Obama's Afghanistan Strategy

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History has a habit of getting in the way of president's grand visions and the presidency of Barack Obama is no exception. Obama rode to electoral victory in no small part because of his opposition to the 'bad war' in Iraq. He argued that America needed to focus on the right war in Afghanistan, but that war now threatens to eclipse his domestic agenda. It is a conflict that the young president did not start, but it is one that he ultimately decided to embrace. The challenge facing Mr. Obama is to manage the conflict in such a way that he continues to redress the critical security situation on the ground, whilst forging a sustainable long-term engagement strategy rather than escalating the conflict beyond a reasonable effort proportion of effort as the Johnson Administration did in Vietnam.

The Obama Administration's Afghan strategy was best articulated in his speech to the US Military Academy at West Point on 9 December 2009. In this speech Mr Obama quite appropriately took the middle road – he added more troops to the effort, but placed the troop increase within a framework that highlighted the dangers of Afghanistan without over inflating the actual risk posed by the situation in Afghanistan. This strategy applies pressure to the US military to make the effort work with the resources at hand, it shores up doubts amongst the Afghan populace that Washington is looking for a quick exit and it motivates the Afghan Government out of its perpetual state of endemic corruption. Unfortunately, in an effort to appease the far left of his own party, the president attached a date for troop 'withdrawal', partially undermining the very message he spent his entire speech articulating – essentially that America was engaged for the long-haul, which might have incentivized the Taliban to pursue talks with the government in Kabul. Damage control in the days following the speech specifying that the date is a start for a drawdown, not all out withdrawal seems to have allayed fears that the US would once again simply abandon Afghanistan.

NEW PARAMETERS FOR THE AFGHAN DILEMMA

American and European involvement in Afghanistan is predicated on the idea that Afghanistan is a failing state and that if the international community failed to 'win' the war the Taliban would return to power, Al Qaeda would once again have a safe haven from which to launch attacks against the west and most critically Islamic radicals would destabilize Pakistan, toppling the quasi-democratic regime there and acquiring nuclear weapons. Over eight years the Bush Administration simultaneously conflated the numerous problems of Afghanistan whilst continually ratcheting up the extremist rhetoric to such an extent that 'failure' would seemingly result in the outright destruction of the

US and the collapse of NATO. This essentially created an atmosphere that Washington must do everything possible to win. As the President Obama noted at West Point, some commentators called "for a more dramatic and open-ended escalation of our [US] war effort – one that would commit us to a nation building project of up to decade."

Instead of falling into this cyclical trap the president delineated a new course. The Administration rejected the 'win at any cost' mentality of the Bush era because:

it sets goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests. As President, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests. And I must weigh all the challenges that our nation faces.

With this statement the president put Kabul on notice that America's patience in Afghanistan was not unlimited. It set conditions around which a policy mindful of matching relative means to specific ends would be implemented. So long as the US continued to believe that Afghanistan was an existential threat to the security of the country, Washington possessed little leverage over its Afghan allies. Given the extent of the corruption in the capital, if the Obama Administration was unable to shift the onus of responsibility onto Karzai, there would be little change from adding more troops and additional reconstruction efforts.

Placing the Afghanistan security risk into the appropriate context does not mean that President Obama is giving up on the war. The President appears to have little intention of walking away from the conflict. He argued to the American people that:

We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future.

The US would thus remain engaged in the pursuit of tangible and achievable victories, without overreach. Building a democratic state in Afghanistan within ten or even twenty years was never feasible, but goals such as denying Al Qaeda a safe-haven and reversing the Taliban's momentum are certainly within grasp. The insurgency against the government is not based on broad popular support and the new strategy recognizes this. The President went on to say that Washington would also "focus our assistance in areas – such as agriculture – that can make an immediate impact in the lives of the Afghan people." Thus the immediate plan is military expansion, but within a defined timeframe, after which the US will remain involved, but with a much smaller military footprint. In this sense it appears the President is trying to have his cake and eat it too. He is not walking away from Afghanistan as the left of the American political spectrum would like, but he is also not going to pursue some amorphous and ultimately unachievable nation building 'victory'. His specification of an initial drawdown date makes this clear.

THE SURGE

The cynical analyst could argue that ultimately the president had to send additional US forces to Afghanistan if he was to provide political cover to his administration. Had he not sent additional forces and the war in Afghanistan deteriorated further, it would most certainly be a critical issue in the 2012 Presidential elections. While domestic politics were certainly part of the mix, the surge was also motivated by a firm belief amongst officials in Afghanistan and Washington that the US and its NATO allies did not have enough troops on the ground to stabilize the country effectively to achieve even Obama's more limited objectives. The surge, however, does little to redress this. According to the US Army Counterinsurgency manual the US should have roughly one trained counterinsurgent for every fifty members of the population. In Afghanistan this means that the number of troops required in Afghanistan to provide comprehensive security across the country is nearly 600,000.

The logic of the Obama surge in Afghanistan (really surge number two following the addition of 17,000 US troops in March) is predicated on the success of the Iraq surge of 2006. The problem is that Afghanistan is not Iraq. First, Afghanistan has a population of 33 million and is 647,500 square kilometers in size, whereas Iraq has a population of just 28 million and in an area two-thirds as large. In Iraq the US had approximately 140,000 troops at the peak of the surge and Iraqi security forces also numbered closer to 600,000. In Afghanistan there will be only 145,000 NATO troops. Furthermore, the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police forces number around 180,000. The Afghan forces are also considerably less proficient at providing security than the Iraqis which compounds the problem. The Afghan force-to-space ratio problem is further complicated by Pakistan, a country with a population of 176 million inhabiting 796,000 square kilometers that shares a disputed 2,430km border with Afghanistan. The Taliban and Al Qaeda forces used Pakistani territory to evade the US after the initial assault in October 2001 and continue to make excellent use of the region.

The basic problem is that the current US strategy overlooks that fact that the insurgency in Iraq was centered in cities and was driven by a minority group (the Sunnis) against the newly dominant Shia Government in Baghdad. Peace was brought about because General Petraeus was able to separate the Sunni insurgents from Al Qaeda fighters whilst incentivizing the Maliki Government to stop backing some of the most brutal Shia militias and to engage in a peace settlement. Afghanistan is a decidedly different context where the US will not achieve a similar outcome in Afghanistan for three reasons. First, the Afghan government is not strong or dominant enough to engage in such a deal. Second, the Afghan insurgency is rural rather than urban making it more difficult to provide full spectrum security. Third, the force to space ratio is far too low to be effective.

So while additional US and European troops may well be able to secure now volatile areas such as Helmand and Kandahar, the insurgents if they are smart will simply move on to other provinces where the international forces are not as dominant. Without the forces to secure the entire country adding 30,000 more US troops will just be a rather ineffective drop in the bucket. As Rory Stewart pointed out in the New York Review of Books in January "the surge is a Mephistophelian bargain, in which the president has gained force but lost time." This is because Obama's surge will do little on the ground in Afghanistan, but a larger troop presence does mean more public attention back home at a time when polities in Europe and America want withdrawal than escalation. Given that the road to a comprehensive peace settlement with the Taliban will take a long time and a lot of patience, the increase may ultimately undermine Obama's ability to reach even his limited goals.

AVOIDING THE AID TRAP

Aside from the military campaign the President's new policy is aware of the faulty logic that has compelled American involvement in nation-building efforts since 1945. The occupation of Germany and Japan and their subsequent reconstructions were praised by many Americans as shining examples of what humane American activism could achieve. Rather than punishing Germany and Japan the US rebuilt them making them rich, free and peaceful societies. Throughout the Cold War this myth of benevolent American nation-building was built up with that hopes that economic and development assistance in places such as Asia and Latin America would lead those countries to aspire to emulate Western liberalism and reject Communist ideals. This same agenda came to dominant democratization programmes in the 1990s and after 2001 development and democratization was seen in both America and Europe as a critical component of risk management in ungoverned spaces such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Sadly development programmes to advance the US national security agenda have a dismal record.

In 1966 South Vietnam received 43 percent of USAID's worldwide budget. The \$8.5 billion in economic aid, however, from 1954 to 1974 and the \$17 billion in military aid on top of the billions more spent by Washington in theatre did little more than fuel the black market, embed corruption and make much of the country dependent welfare zones. Vietnam was the first war where the United States utilized military forces not to win, but to buy time for the war to be won by civilian social programmes. A similar pattern has been repeated in many other theatres with the most recent being Iraq and Afghanistan. Throwing money at the Afghan problem, however, has done little more than make the situation deteriorate even faster. Large amounts of development funds are simply recycled back to the west via development advisors and international corporations. Considerable amounts are skimmed off the top by corrupt officials and the government in Kabul is incentivized to not address the security situation so as to ensure continued economic assistance from the international community.

The new Obama strategy will maintain assistance to the Afghan government, but it no longer offers a blank cheque. Indeed, under this new approach the Afghans would do better to clean up their act so as to ensure long-term American development and security support, as opposed the more withdrawn military approach advocated by Vice President Biden. If the Obama surge fails to provide security and the Afghan Government does not reform itself, the US will switch to a disrupt the grid strategy that may keep America safe, but will ultimately do little to advance the security of Afghans.

THE REAL 'LONG WAR'

The Bush Administration believed it was engaging in a long war against terrorism, but terrorism is a tactic, not an opponent. Many argued that the real issue was a lack of development in places like Afghanistan that enabled radical Islamist groups to come to power and support international terrorism. The answer to ending terrorism was to be found in a radical development and nation-building agenda. While it is true that ungoverned spaces do offer shelter to nefarious actors intent on disrupting international security, it would be wrong to assert that the US and its European allies can carry out intrusive nation building campaigns in countries around the world.

If such logic were to win out, NATO forces would soon be on their way to Yemen, and then thereafter to Somalia, and from there onto another ten failing states. The Obama strategy in Afghanistan recognizes the limitations of American power. It does not abandon the hope of a better future. It does offer an ultimately more sustainable approach. It recognizes that 'democracy' will not be an 'out' for NATO or the US in Afghanistan. By realistically appraising the issue in terms of probability as opposed to possibilities the president has offered NATO and America a solution to the terrible problem of Afghanistan. A series of steps over the last twelve months, such as a reduced reliance on airpower, a people-centric approach to security and additional economic development, have all helped to create an atmosphere where 70 percent of Afghans feel that their country is headed in the right direction (up from 40% in 2009). Around 71 percent believe things will be even better next year; Obama's new approach may very well make this hope a reality. ■

Simply Press the Button? The Reality of Resetting with Russia

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By the end of the Bush era, Russian-American relations had reached a nadir unprecedented in the post Cold-War era. The millennium had started out well enough for the two old foes: Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to call Bush on 9/11, he threw his support behind the US-led effort in Afghanistan, and Bush looked into the former KGB man's eyes and saw his soul. From there, though, it was all downhill; the US and Russia found themselves on opposite sides of many of the biggest foreign policy issues of the decade: the war in Iraq, the Orange revolution in the Ukraine, and Iran's nuclear capability; on other issues, such as North Korea or the Israeli action in Lebanon, there was quieter, but significant disagreement. Russians swallowed Bush's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, but refused to accept a plan for a defensive missile shield placed in the Czech Republic and Poland. And then came the war in Georgia...

Russia did not feature as prominently in candidate Obama's speeches as other foreign policy issues seen to have been mismanaged by the Bush administration, like the confrontation with Iran or the war in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, President Obama came to office with a clear desire to overhaul the relationship and put it on different footing. This was a sensible instinct: Russia would be an important player in the areas the new administration planned to focus most: Afghanistan, where Russia could directly provide logistical support and influence its Central Asian neighbors to do the same; and Iran, where Russia had influence and would need to be included either for a successful sanctions regime or for a broader settlement of the nuclear issue.

A year later the relationship has made progress but remains stuck in the mud. On Afghanistan, Russia's agreement to provide transport for NATO supplies has meant a crucial alternative to the potentially perilous "southern" route through Pakistan. On Iran, Moscow's participation was crucial in the near-agreement reached in October 2009 that would have seen spent fuel from Iranian reactors going to Russia, which would ship it back in a form suitable only for civilian purposes. Additionally, President Medvedev has signaled a willingness to reconsider additional sanctions if other options fail. And the tone of the relationship has changed as well. Russia welcomed the abandonment of the missile shield the Bush administration had planned to place in the Czech Republic and Poland, and in return Moscow dropped its threat to place Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad, which would have seemed menacing to the eastern Europeans.

More problems remain unsolved than not, however. A new missile treaty seems close, but still not signed, with negotiators stuck (as often in arms control negotiations) on issues of verification. On Iran, Medvedev's suggestion that sanctions might be at some point inevitable were offset by comments from Foreign Minister Lavrov that sanctions would be "counterproductive." More broadly, there seems to be a disconnect arising from different expectations of what a reset means.

The reality is that the problems in the relationship are more profound than most US officials are willing to admit. The splits that took place during the Bush era coincided with a reevaluation (and to a large extent, a rejection) of everything associated with the 1990s, including the relationship with the United States. If US officials still look on this period as one where their countrymen went east to help the transition to capitalism and democracy while their leaders formed an unprecedented partnership, to Russians this was a period where American meddling helped bring their once great country to its knees, while on the global arena the US (and its western allies) took advantage of the situation to surround Russia with bases and deny it its rightful place in the world. The expansion of NATO, in particular, is widely seen as a betrayal of promises made at the end of the Cold War, and western support of the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine respectively, as unacceptable meddling in Russia's rightful sphere of interest.

Perhaps this picture is not completely accurate, but it is popular and still dominant. It can be overcome, but the Russians are proving to be tough customers. They like some of the things they see from the new administration (the scrapping of the missile plan), are troubled by others, and in any case intent on giving only as much as they receive. Part of the problem may be the administration's perceived inconsistency when it comes to relations with Russia. At the centre of this is Vice President Joseph Biden, who seems to have been tasked with calming the nerves of jittery East Europeans as the administration tries to reshape the US-Russian relationship. Biden has gone above and beyond the call of duty in this respect, making comments about Russian weakness and pledging support to Georgia and Ukraine in a way that deeply rankles sensitivities in Moscow across most of the political spectrum.

Biden's gaffes, which in this case reflect a genuine attachment to Eastern European countries and what seems to be a deep mistrust of Russian intentions, have also been followed by moves intended to further allay East European fears. The decision to deliver Patriot missiles to Poland, accompanied by US servicemen, is one example. The missiles were originally promised under the Bush administration, but Obama's decision served as proof to those who believe the administration's approach to Russia is case of new bottles for old wine. Russian defence officials insist that the missiles will do nothing to protect Poland from Iranian missiles, but do represent a threat to Russia.

Hurt feelings, historical wrongs, and perceptions aside, there are a number of key areas where Russian and US interests diverge, and these may pose a much bigger longer-term problem for the Obama administration than any sense of historical grievance.

Take Iran, for instance. US officials are very keen to get Russian cooperation, either as a member of the sanctions regime or as a facilitator of a nuclear deal. In the recent agreement worked out by negotiators, but ultimately rejected by Iran, Russia was to buy spent nuclear fuel and return it later in a processed form unusable for weapons. Russia is quite happy to play this part, but it balks at most efforts at tightening the sanction regime. Iran is a significant Russian trading partner (exports to Iran amounted to \$3.3 billion in 2008). Moreover, it is Russia's southern neighbour, and, despite being a revolutionary Islamic power, it has never taken advantage of Russia's problem in its own Muslim regions, such as Chechnya, or in former Soviet Republics like Tajikistan, where the population shares linguistic and cultural ties. From Moscow's point of view, undermining this relationship, cultivated over centuries between regimes of different stripes in both Tehran and Moscow, makes little sense.

Similar things can be said about the Middle East more broadly. The Russian-Israeli relationship is infinitely better than it was during the Cold War (Israelis and Russians can visit each other's countries without visas now) but Russia is still a patron of countries hostile to Jerusalem. Besides Iran, Russia supplies weapons to Syria and fighter planes to Lebanon. While it cooperates in international mediation of Arab-Israeli peace talks, it does so decidedly on the Arab side.

In this light, the Russian decision to start cooperating on Afghanistan looks more like a case of matching interests rather than a response to overtures from the Obama administration. Indeed, Afghanistan may prove one of the more durable areas of cooperation. For all of the Russian rhetoric about the US led effort being amateurish compared to the Soviet one (and one can hear this quite often), there is also a recognition that Russia needs stability there as much as, if not more than, the US. Afghanistan is a source for the heroin that destroys the lives of so many of Russia's young people, and there is a realization that chaos there will inevitably affect Moscow's Central

Asian allies and, indirectly, Russia itself. As economist and Kremlin adviser Igor Yurgens said at an event in London this autumn, "If the Taliban win, we have radical Islamists with nuclear arms. Do you think this is a birthday present for Russia?"

The point is not that broader cooperation is impossible, but that, from the Russian point of view, it will take much more than a change in tone. Medvedev, in particular, is said to prefer a closer relationship with the U.S. and seems to genuinely like Obama. But officials hoping to take advantage of a Medvedev/Putin split should think again: even if it exists, no Russian leader will make significant concessions to the US, particularly those that go against Russian interests, without some serious concessions in return. For now, Russia is playing coy; like a once spurned lover, it demands proof that it will not be hurt again. In the long term, US leaders will have to get used to treating Russia on its own terms, not lecturing it on human rights (as some Russian activists and many western ones would like) and accepting its dominant influence in countries like Georgia and Ukraine. They will also have to work much harder to convince Russians that their interests match those of the US, and be prepared to horse-trade where they do not, such as Iran. If they do not, they will find that for Russian politicians, anti-American rhetoric and an anti-western stance play well and is thus tempting not to deploy, especially when times are tough. ■

Playing Catch-Up: The United States and Southeast Asia

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Relations between Washington and Southeast Asia have received a strong boost by the incoming administration of President Barack Obama. This follows the perception and at times criticism both in Southeast Asia and Washington that under President Bush the United States did not always pay sufficient attention to the region and strengthen as much as it could have relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

LOOKING BACK: THE BUSH YEARS

When former President George W. Bush was in office, US policy towards Southeast Asia inspired a fair amount of unease. Within the region, for instance, President Bush's distinct initial focus on counter-terrorism, especially the notion that Southeast Asia constituted a 'second front' and the war in Iraq, raised serious concerns. After the renewed detention of Nobel Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in May 2003, Washington exerted increasing diplomatic pressure on ASEAN to be more critical of the military regime in Myanmar (Burma). From 2005, US public diplomacy towards ASEAN at certain key junctures seemed to underline the region's persistent weakness but also relative insignificance, raising questions regarding Washington's commitment to Southeast Asia. At issue was above all the decision by President Bush to call off the summit with ASEAN in 2007 due to scheduling difficulties; but there were also two notable absences from ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial meetings by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

That said, the Bush administration was instrumental in launching a number of initiatives, such as the ASEAN Cooperation Plan (2002), the Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative (2002), the ASEAN-U.S. Enhanced Partnership (2006), and the US-ASEAN Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (2006). These initiatives have served to foster regional cooperation in several areas, particularly economic cooperation. In a symbolic move, Washington was also the first ASEAN dialogue partner in April 2008 to appoint an Ambassador to the Association. Bilateral relations with Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia significantly improved under President Bush. Still, despite this overall record the Bush administration left four distinct impressions. First, that it had not paid enough attention to Southeast Asia. Second, that its relationship with ASEAN was at least partially hostage to Washington's concerns over Burma/Myanmar. Third, that its preference for bilateralism came at the expense of better multilateral relations with the region. And fourth, that it ceded influence to China in Southeast Asia.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND ASEAN

In assessing the importance of the ASEAN region, the Obama administration has been guided by a number of factors. Southeast Asia is home to around 600 million people, including approximately 230 million in Indonesia, which boasts the world's largest Muslim population. In global terms, Indonesia is also the third largest democracy and a possible political model for the wider Muslim world. Collectively the ASEAN countries constitute America's fifth largest trading partner (US\$182 billion in 2008). US investments in Southeast Asia total around US\$150 billion, more than combined cumulative figures for China and India. Southeast Asia straddles several strategic waterways, above all the Malacca Strait. There are thus very good reasons for the US to support socio-economic and political development as well as regional stability in Southeast Asia. From a geopolitical perspective, the US has also had to acknowledge that against the backdrop of China's rise relations between Beijing and ASEAN capitals have generally improved significantly, especially since the 1997-8 Asian financial and economic crisis. Finally, some Southeast Asian countries have recently been experiencing considerable political stresses on their respective home fronts and in their bilateral relations, making the region seem more unstable than only some years ago. Washington has decided to respond to these developments and challenges by promoting a coherent and stable ASEAN. This involves strengthening relations at the multilateral level and reinforcing bilateral cooperative relations.

A PROMISING START

Immediately upon assuming office the Obama administration gave new prominence to relations with ASEAN. Crucial in this regard was the visit to Indonesia in February 2009 by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Framed in the context of a new era of diplomacy in the wider Asia, Clinton announced Washington's intention to form a comprehensive partnership with Jakarta for advancing common interests on regional and global issues, including regional security, democracy promotion, trade, and climate change. Moreover, Clinton emphasized that the building partnership with Indonesia was a 'critical step' with respect to the US commitment to 'smart power' – a concept coined in contradistinction to the focus on hard power associated with the preceding Bush administration. She highlighted a new willingness on the part of Washington to listen to Southeast Asia's governments, while also reaching out to their civil societies. Significantly, the Secretary of State paid an unprecedented visit to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta to demonstrate America's commitment to the Association, and held out the possibility of Washington acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, Southeast Asia's regional code of conduct. She also admitted to the failure of Washington's policy of sanctions vis-à-vis Myanmar.

In July 2009, with North Korea and the implementation of UN Security Resolution 1874 very much on her mind, Secretary of State Clinton attended the 16th ASEAN Regional Forum. She also signed the instrument of accession to the Treaty of Amity

and Cooperation, announced the intended opening of a US mission to ASEAN, and conducted the first-ever ministerial meeting between the US and the countries of the Lower Mekong (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand). She assured the ASEAN and ARF Chair – Thailand – that Washington was interested in a broader, stronger and deeper relationship with Bangkok. In September, Clinton announced the outcome of the administration's Burma policy review, which led the State Department to embark upon a policy of pragmatic engagement vis-à-vis Myanmar involving a high-level dialogue. In November 2009, when meeting leaders of the other Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies in Singapore, President Obama also participated in the inaugural ASEAN-US leaders' meeting. Notably, the President vowed to strengthen US engagement in Southeast Asia both with individual allies and partners and with ASEAN as an institution. The President also indicated a commitment to a further round of leaders' talks in 2010.

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S REACTION

ASEAN countries have welcomed the Obama administration's decision to engage more deeply with Southeast Asia. In particular, they have celebrated Washington's resolution to upgrade the multilateral relationship with the Association. From a regional perspective, the grouping's ties with Washington now resemble those already forged with other major powers. The US accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which has been signed by more than 25 dialogue partners and states friendly with the grouping, has been regarded as particularly important, not least because the latter reinforces ASEAN's preferred norms for interstate relations, including the non-use of force and the principle of non-interference. The US-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting at least puts the US on a par with China, Japan, India and Russia. Also, ASEAN countries have welcomed Washington's decision to no longer let the Burmese tail wag the ASEAN dog in the sense that the perceived need to respond to events in Myanmar is no longer to come at the expense of relations with the Association as a whole.

That said, Obama, self-titled 'America's first Pacific President', has probably not yet fully convinced sceptics that America's substantive ties with the ASEAN states are set to change significantly. There is as yet no clearly articulated comprehensive strategy toward ASEAN. Moreover, to what extent Washington will henceforth really focus more on Southeast Asia is not certain. President Obama's own November visit to East Asia again highlighted the importance Washington for good reasons attaches to Northeast Asia in so far as the President first visited Japan and – following his attendance at the APEC leaders' meeting – then travelled to China and South Korea. The US security alliance remains at the core of US posture in the Asia-Pacific, and the tasks of managing the rise of China and dealing with North Korea will remain central to US Asia policy. The President was for a while expected to include Indonesia, where he lived as a boy, in his November 2009 itinerary. This visit will now take place this year.

CHALLENGES FOR THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

The Obama administration has indicated a desire to begin or reinforce cooperation with the ASEAN states in many areas: climate change, economics, trade, education, health, traditional diplomacy and security issues. It has also committed itself to support the establishment of the ASEAN Community by 2015. Deepening cooperation with ASEAN as an organisation is not straightforward, however. There is, for instance, no obvious let alone unequivocally accepted leader within ASEAN that America could ask to shape the Association's ties with Washington. Indeed, ASEAN countries may welcome a benign US role in Southeast Asia, but to some extent some also remain suspicious of American intentions. Member states espouse a range of interests and have to respond to different security and strategic pressures.

The grouping itself faces numerous challenges in the quest to move toward regional integration, including significant political diversity, varying national compliance rates with regionally agreed objectives and a serious socio-economic divide between the early and later members of the Association. For the last two years, ASEAN's cohesion and unity has to some degree also been called into question by what can only be described as extraordinary diplomatic tensions between some members, such as between Thailand and Cambodia. Notably, the ASEAN Charter, ratified in 2008, has brought about some important changes in the grouping's workings, but the powers and role of the ASEAN Secretary-General remain circumscribed and the financial wherewithal made available to the Association by its members continues to be extremely modest.

By strengthening cooperation with the Association, Washington can help the Association to regain some strategic weight, and contribute to regional development

and stability. At the same time, the Obama administration may find it difficult to persuade ASEAN to change collective practices or to win new influence. Four examples can illustrate this. For instance, the US has invited members of the newly founded ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights to Washington, but taking into account acute intramural differences within Southeast Asia over its establishment and role, it is far from clear to what extent this step is likely to rapidly yield marked changes in ASEAN's approach to the promotion and protection of human rights.

Secondly, Washington is evidently interested in promoting the idea of a defence dialogue (and related cooperation) with ASEAN in the format of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). So far, the ADMM-Plus has not taken off in practice and whether it will soon to do so is not clear. One requirement is that the ADMM-Plus country must have significant interactions with ASEAN defence establishments. This is not yet necessarily true for all ASEAN states, but the issue is that all ASEAN countries do need to endorse ADMM-Plus status. President Obama's wish is also that the US engages with the East Asia Summit more formally. This may be easier to achieve given Washington's recent accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. That said, ASEAN seems eager to maintain its centrality amid diverse proposals to build a new regional architecture.

Thirdly, while the administration's willingness to embark on the US Lower Mekong Initiative to assist with the development of the Indochinese states in particular is welcomed by the latter, it cannot be taken for granted that such moves will automatically serve other likely US purposes, such as limiting China's presence and influence in this subregion. After all, Beijing has for some time sought to advance cooperation among the main political

players of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and also has high hopes for the Pan Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation Forum. In addition, China announced in October 2009 the provision of a US\$15 billion loan for the development of infrastructure in the ASEAN region and the establishment of a US\$10 billion China-ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund, the latter involving a private equity fund to support projects in the areas of infrastructure, energy and construction that are most likely to be relevant to mainland Southeast Asia.

When it comes to further stimulating trade with Southeast Asia, President Obama may have announced that the US will engage the members of the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (Singapore, New Zealand, Brunei Darussalam, and Chile) in their quest for a model trade agreement, but the US government's enthusiasm for free trade is likely to be hobbled by the economic predicament it still faces. As such, free trade with Southeast Asia beyond what has already been agreed seems a rather distant prospect.

BILATERAL RELATIONS

A further question is to what extent Washington can easily inject new momentum and substance into relationships with Southeast Asian allies and partners as well as put those with Myanmar on a new footing. As regards Thailand, for instance, the Obama administration seems quite concerned, at least privately, about the domestic political situation in Thailand; yet it sees limits to the extent to which it can be seen to comment on or even influence Thai domestic affairs.

Relations with Indonesia, the only Southeast Asian country represented in the G-20, are likely to move ahead not only in field of financial and economic cooperation, as exemplified for example by the planned return of the US Peace Corps to the archipelago, notwithstanding the longstanding political sensitivities on the matter and the current domestic political context in which the administration of President Yudhoyono finds itself. However, in formulating their comprehensive partnership the two sides will need to bridge apparent differences over core issues such as the details of the future Asia-Pacific architecture, disarmament and proliferation, and the Middle East peace process.

In developing other bilateral relationships, such as the one with Vietnam, the current ASEAN Chair, the US will have to remain sensitive to historical memories and Hanoi's complicated ties with China. That said, the visit to Washington in December 2009 by Vietnamese Minister of Defense General Phung Quang Thanh, who continued the tradition started in 2000 by former US Secretary of Defence William Cohen to pursue reciprocal visits every three years, seems to have set the path for the further expansion of military-military cooperation.

MYANMAR

The Obama administration has been careful to point out that its objectives towards the military government remain essentially unchanged when compared to those of the Bush administration. President Obama has personally spelled out the precise conditions that Myanmar's military government must meet in order for substantive bilateral relations to change: the release of all political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi; an end to conflicts with minority groups; and a genuine dialogue between the government, the democratic opposition and minority groups on shared vision of the future. Notwithstanding the positive response that the US Burma policy review has elicited in Naypyidaw in 2009, it is far from certain that Washington's embrace of a high-level dialogue will produce the desired results. Myanmar's military leadership has a record of following through with decisions and policies in pursuit of its perceived political-security imperative. It has also made clear that the 2008 Constitution is not to be altered in advance of the elections scheduled for this year. Equally, the military leadership sees no need for the kind of political process seemingly envisioned by Washington though Naypyidaw might hope that the US is able to persuade Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to unambiguously change her public position on sanctions. Thus, while from America's perspective the outcome of the newly instituted high-level dialogue is linked to the military's willingness to accommodate American expectations and the need for some tangible results, Washington is likely to find that the State Peace and Development Council is going to remain disinclined to offer serious concessions unless these are perceived to be in the interest of the regime.

CONCLUSION

The first year of the Obama administration has seen Washington expend significant efforts with a view to upgrading relations with the ASEAN countries. However, the region is very diverse both politically and as regards levels of socio-economic development, and this is likely to complicate US efforts to deepen ties. While regional expectations of President Obama remain high, political sensitivities and differences also persist. The symbolically important efforts undertaken hitherto by the Obama administration will need to be complemented in the next three years by further substantive measures if relations with the ASEAN countries are to be propelled to new heights with a view to re-consolidating America's role in the region. ■

US-EU Relations after Lisbon: Reviving Transatlantic Cooperation

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Speaking in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt in June 1963, President Kennedy said that the United States looked forward “to a Europe united and strong, speaking with a common voice, acting with a common will, a world power capable of meeting world problems as a full and equal partner”.

Nearly half a century later, the United States undoubtedly still wants a strong and united Europe, but President Obama’s administration has had to spend its first year waiting for even the modest steps forward to more effective European unity contained in the Lisbon Treaty to come into effect – and also perforce has to deal with a very different world from the one Kennedy knew.

In the world of 2010 it surely makes no sense for Europeans to worry endlessly about whether transatlantic relations are or are not still the top US foreign policy priority. Instead of that essentially sterile debate, we would do better to accept philosophically that the US nowadays must for obvious reasons give China, in particular, a lot of time and attention. That in no way rules out a high priority for Europe: a Pacific President and a Transatlantic President are plainly not mutually exclusive. And it remains in any case clear that the United States and Europe, as Secretary of State Clinton said when welcoming on 19 November the appointment of the EU’s new High Representative, form a community of values, uniting 800 million people, which for them both is of profound importance.

Not just shared values: shared interests, too. The issues which unite the US and the EU will always to some extent vary from time to time, but their salience to the core interests of both will never be in doubt. Some, such as the trade relationship, are self-evidently of permanent significance. Take almost any major issue on the global agenda, and the EU and US will both be at the heart of the debate. As President Obama said on 19 November: “The United States has no stronger partner than Europe in advancing security and prosperity round the world”.

How effective a partner Europe can be for the United States is of course open to many questions. In his recent analysis for the Centre for European Reform (*Is Europe Doomed To Fail As A Power?*), Charles Grant produced a characteristically penetrating analysis of Europe’s shortcomings, as a world power in the making. But in fact, as Robert Cooper’s response (in the same booklet) made clear, Europe has nonetheless in the last ten years achieved more than many know, and if it grasps the opportunities provided by the Lisbon Treaty now has a real prospect – given time and patience – of developing a more coherent and effective foreign policy than ever before.

The more coherent and effective European policy is, the more inconvenient it will sometimes be for the United States, for the two will by no means always agree. United States administrations will always be tempted to use bilateral links with EU member states to promote key US interests, aiming to divide and rule. But since the first beginnings of European integration, and the days of George Ball’s friendship with Jean Monnet, the US has always promoted the idea of a united Europe – making clear, as President Kennedy said in the Paulskirche, that “this new European greatness will not be an object of fear, but a source of strength, for the United States of America”.

So what conclusions, against that background, can one reach at this stage as a first annual report on transatlantic relations in the Obama era?

In the first place, there has been a welcome change of tone. As Philip Gordon (Assistant Secretary of the State Department) put it in Brussels on 30 September, this US administration is well aware that it can’t possibly deal with all the challenges on the global agenda alone: “As we look around the world and think about which partners can help us deal with challenges like Iran, Afghanistan, climate change and the global financial crisis... nowhere are there greater or more important partners than in Europe and the European Union”. Moreover: “It’s not just understanding that we need strong partners, but dealing with them in a way that we hope shows some humility... and respect for the positions of others... We want to take the partnership with Europe in particular to a new level”.

Secondly, while there is still (as usual) much transatlantic disagreement, many in Europe nonetheless warmly welcome the fact that the US is now engaging with Iran, welcome the increased US commitment to tackling climate change, are glad that there is now an EU-US Ministerial Energy Council, and are convinced that the EU still has a great deal to gain from further improvement of the transatlantic dialogue. When President Obama received the EU’s leaders at the White House last November it was amply clear that both sides were determined to continue to give their relationship a very high priority.

Predictions of the demise of the transatlantic alliance are wildly off the mark. Quite apart from the shared values it represents, the combined economic interests bound up in it are in themselves entirely compelling. The two economies account for well over half the world’s GDP, and are hugely interdependent. Both US and EU investors have more than \$1 trillion invested across the Atlantic. If goods and services are combined, the EU and US form the largest bilateral trade partnership in the world.

So there is no lack of substance to the relationship. And the Lisbon Treaty’s improvements in the European foreign policy architecture should somewhat facilitate its further development.

There will certainly be further friction along the way. As Kissinger observed in *White House Years* there is a perpetual nostalgia about transatlantic relations which harks back to the Marshall Plan, when a bold US proposal elicited an enthusiastic and grateful European response. That was the secret dream of US foreign policy come true: American moral leadership evoking cooperation without a hint of coercion. But ever since, each time Europe has taken a step towards greater unitary effectiveness, it has become not just more powerful but also more assertive, and – from time to time – more difficult for

Getting a Deal on Climate Change: Obama's Flexible Multilateralism

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'It will be as different as night from day', is how Senator John Kerry described the impact of Barack Obama's election victory on America's stance in international climate politics. Kerry made this prediction in December 2008 at the fourteenth Conference of the Parties (COP-14) to the UN climate convention in Poznan, Poland, which he attended on behalf of the President-elect. For a short while, the imminent political change in the White House seemed to lift the otherwise downbeat mood among delegates in Poznan, and a renewed sense of optimism set in about reaching compromise on a new climate deal by the end of 2009, at COP-15 in Copenhagen.

The US presidential election of 2008 is still rightly seen as a turning point in international climate policy. However, questions remain about the depth of America's policy shift and its significance for international politics. Copenhagen proved to be the first international test for the Obama Administration's new approach to climate policy, and the outcome – a non-binding political statement without numerical commitments for emission reductions – failed to live up to expectations. Originally billed as the most important factor shaping the global approach to tackling climate change, Obama's Presidency has left some observers feeling underwhelmed. Yet Obama himself managed to broker a deal in the final hours of the doomed Copenhagen conference, and 2010 could be the make-or-break year for domestic climate action in America. Has Obama done enough to prepare the ground for a new international climate regime?

FROM GREEN RHETORIC TO INTERNATIONAL ACTION?

Few would doubt that the US has firmly re-engaged in international climate diplomacy, and that this has boosted the chances of a treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol. On entering office, Obama reversed eight years of obstructionism under George W. Bush and committed the US to playing a constructive role in the international process. This alone has removed one of the most important obstacles to successful climate negotiations, for America, historically the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, possesses veto power in global climate politics which it has been willing to use.

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the US to manage. There is an inevitable oscillation between US complaints about Europe being weak and ineffectual and renewed complaints whenever Europe gets its act together in a way the US finds inconvenient.

In his *Years of Upheaval* Kissinger returned to the theme of transatlantic relations, noting that he had always doubted that Europe would unite in order to share US burdens – "or that it would be content with a subordinate role once it had the means to implement its own views... After Europe had grown economically strong and politically united, Atlantic cooperation could not be an American enterprise in which consultations elaborated primarily American designs. A common focus had to be achieved among sovereign equals; partnership had to be evoked rather than assumed".

The strength of the Obama administration's approach in this area is in my view that it appears, unlike its predecessor, to have understood the wisdom of Kissinger's analysis. Insofar as it has not yet done so, it would be well advised to study in detail the way in which the Nixon administration handled Europe – not always with success, but with a real historical grasp and strategic subtlety. As Kissinger pointed out in *Diplomacy*, the Americans who helped create transatlantic relations as we now know them – Truman, Acheson, Marshall and Eisenhower – shared the reservations of most of their compatriots about the European style of diplomacy. But they also understood that, without its Atlantic ties, America would find itself in a world of nations with which – except in the Western hemisphere – it has few moral bonds or common traditions, and would be forced to conduct a pure *Realpolitik*, which is essentially incompatible with the American tradition.

Crafting transatlantic policy in the aftermath of the Cold War has required a new and more difficult calculus, bereft of the old certainties – but there is no inherent reason why the EU and US should not increasingly over time be able to cooperate as effectively in relation to many global problems as they did in the past over East-West relations.

Many Europeans know well enough, as Charles Grant has argued, that they should not leave the US, China, Russia, India and others to design the new world order. That is one of the major challenges for the EU and the new Barroso Commission. For the United States a key foreign policy challenge for the next few years will be the task of crafting a common transatlantic approach to this new global agenda in a genuinely cooperative rather than domineering manner. President Kennedy's dream of 1963 will not be achieved for a while yet, but there is no reason why transatlantic relations in the time of Obama should not be a lot smoother and more productive than they were in the first eight years of this century. ■

Political rhetoric and substance have then changed. At the same time, American diplomats remain constrained by the lack of firm domestic policies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and particularly the absence of a legally binding carbon emissions trading scheme. Has the Obama Administration done enough to revitalise US climate policy? And can the US once again hope to claim a leadership role in global environmental politics, as it did in the 1970s and 1980s?

Questions have also been raised about America's role in the controversial conclusion of the Copenhagen climate summit, which culminated in the Copenhagen Accord, a non-binding political agreement that was agreed among a small circle of heads of state and that was merely "noted" by the final COP-15 plenary session. Did Obama's efforts to clinch a deal in Copenhagen save the conference from collapse? Or did he betray the hopes of environmentalists at home and abroad by settling for the lowest common denominator in last-minute bargaining with a select group of emerging economies, most notably China?

The answer to these questions is not straightforward. It is less about whether or not Obama is committed to tackling climate change – most indications suggest he is, as are key members of his Administration. Instead, the answer must address the peculiar difficulties faced by the Obama Administration, and indeed by any US Administration, in developing a proactive and convincing international climate strategy. The President, although in charge of foreign environmental policy, faces two powerful constraints at the domestic level: the political coalitions in Congress that determine the pace and direction of domestic legislation on climate change; and the efforts by interest groups – business and NGOs – to shape events in Congress and on the international scene. In other words, US climate policy flows from the domestic to the international, and global environmental leadership that is credible requires, first and foremost, strong domestic action. Obama's record in international climate policy should therefore be judged in terms of how effectively he has navigated and shaped Congressional politics on this issue, and how successfully he has exploited the opportunities that have arisen from a resurgent environmental movement and shifts in business attitudes to climate action. On this, the Administration's first-year record suggests some notable successes but also room for improvement. Obama's climate policy got off to a flying start but is at risk of being bogged down in Congressional committees and battles with key industries. 2010 promises to be a critical year.

CAP-AND-TRADE LEGISLATION: DELAYED, NOT DEFEATED

Fighting global warming and America's reliance of foreign oil had been important issues on the campaign trail on which Obama and his rival John McCain were largely united. Once in office, Obama lost no time to announce swift and drastic action on both objectives. As early as January 2009, Obama introduced the first measures to raise fuel efficiency standards and reduce emissions from vehicles, in a clear sign of his willingness to take on the powerful car industry. The Administration's first budget proposal in February included predictions of a \$150 billion revenue stream from a future greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme that would fund investment in clean technologies over 10 years. And in May, the Administration passed the first hurdle in its effort to introduce emissions trading, when a key House of Representatives committee on energy and commerce voted in favour of proposals for a domestic cap and trade bill.

But for much of the remainder of 2009, climate change appeared to slip down the political agenda, as the financial and economic crisis, health care reform and military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan consumed most of the Administration's attention. The Administration could take relief from the fact that the House of Representatives passed the American Clean Energy and Security Act (Waxman-Markey bill) with a 219 to 212 majority in June. This was only achieved after many key elements had been watered-down or abandoned, such as the White House's proposal for a 100 percent auction of carbon permits. Once the Senate began considering similar legislative proposals, the move towards a national emissions trading scheme began to slow down even further. Two different versions of the climate bill have so far passed important Senate committees, most recently the Environment and Public Works Committee in November 2009. But with climate legislation still to be discussed in four more committees and the existing proposals to be amalgamated into one comprehensive

Senate bill before reconciliation with the House version can begin, hopes are dwindling that a final bill can be passed before the Congressional elections in November 2010.

Advocates of strong climate action have become increasingly frustrated with the President's hands-off approach in the Congressional debates. As in health care reform, Obama pronounced broad objectives and principles on climate policy, but left the more detailed policy questions to be resolved by Congress. This has become a question of political style as much as of political prioritization. Clearly, getting health care agreed trumped climate change as the Democratic leadership's number-one objective for 2009. And with many of Obama's Democratic supporters showing hostility to costly climate action – 44 Democratic Representatives in the House voted against the cap and trade bill – the Obama team felt it could not drive the debate as forcefully as it might have wished.

Still, in spring 2009 the Administration started to prod Congressmen into action by threatening to use the Environmental Protection Agency's statutory powers to regulate carbon dioxide. This step was finally taken in December in the run-up to the Copenhagen conference, when EPA declared carbon dioxide to be a pollutant under the Clean Air Act. This now allows the Administration to impose carbon regulations on carbon-intensive industries even if Congress fails to pass a bill. As yet, Obama seems determined to give Congress the time it needs to find a compromise, but time may be running out as the mid-term elections in November could change the political arithmetic of domestic climate politics.

DOMESTIC INTEREST GROUPS: TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

Although environmental issues played a prominent role in Obama's electoral campaign back in 2008, the President cannot be assured of broad popular support for a strong climate strategy. Over the last year, public opinion has shown little movement in favour of tougher action on greenhouse gas emissions. The economic recession and rising energy prices have if anything undermined popular support for climate policy. In contrast, the environmental movement has been revitalised by Obama's victory, after eight years of marginalization during the Bush Presidency, and is now faced with the first tangible opportunity for national climate legislation since Clinton's failed effort to introduce carbon taxation in 1993. But the environmental camp is divided over whether to offer strong support to a Congressional bill that many consider not ambitious enough and full of concessions to industry.

Climate security may not have captured the public's imagination, but the climate legislation going through Congress has acted as a powerful magnet for business lobbyists. Unlike in the 1990s, when most business groups were opposed to domestic and international climate action, deep divisions are now evident within the corporate sector. The emergence of large and powerful coalitions of pro-regulatory business interests has eased the passage of the climate bill through Congress so far, and Obama and the Democrats on Capitol Hill have been able to build new coalitions with high-tech companies and the renewable energy sector. Major companies such as Duke Energy, General Electric, Alcoa, DuPont and Johnson & Johnson have publicly supported cap and trade legislation. And a whole new range of green energy interests has emerged that seeks to cash in on the market opportunities and subsidies potential of the Administration's green strategy.

Still, close links between industrial-state Democrats and traditional fossil fuel and manufacturing companies threaten to block further progress in the Senate, and the sceptical business interests have put together a powerful lobbying effort, with the US Chamber of Commerce and other groups leading a vigorous and well-funded campaign against cap and trade legislation. The number of lobbyists hired to work on climate-related legislation in Washington, DC, has shot up dramatically in the last few years. According to the Center for Public Integrity, 2430 lobbyists were active on climate issues last year, more than four lobbyists for every member of Congress. Business groups on both sides of the argument will want to make sure that their interests are taken into account, whatever happens on the legislative front.

COPENHAGEN AND AFTER

With the outlook for domestic climate legislation as yet uncertain, Obama faced a serious mismatch between the domestic and international timetables for climate action. While the UN negotiations on a post-Kyoto Protocol agreement were gearing up for the critical stage in Copenhagen in December 2009, the Administration had little choice but to offer cautious targets for emissions reductions that were conditional on future legislative decisions at home. The US put on the negotiation table a commitment to cut emissions 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020, a figure that reflected the House bill and the state of debate in the Senate. This would then be an interim target on the path towards reaching an 80% reduction target by 2050, the target that Obama had announced earlier in the year. Given that the US had done little since Kyoto to reign in emissions, the proposed targets were disappointing if measured against the Kyoto Protocol baseline of 1990. They also fell well below what other leading industrialized economies were offering, but reflected both economic and political realities in the US.

More importantly, the US used its international influence to gather support among other critical players in international climate politics, most notably China and other emerging economies with a growing carbon footprint. In a deliberate move to break out of the UN negotiation straightjacket and open up new diplomatic channels, President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton conducted a series of bilateral and plurilateral talks to bridge the wide gap between Northern and Southern perspectives on how to cut emissions. With the launch of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate in March 2009, Obama gave an early taste of the new US strategy. This approach carried over into the final days of the Copenhagen conference, when heads of state were trying to agree a political statement that would end two weeks of slow and cumbersome UN-style negotiations. In the end, the Copenhagen Accord was agreed in a small setting of just five nations, involving only the US, China, India, Brazil and South Africa. The EU and Japan, stalwarts of the Kyoto Protocol process, were merely asked to accept the deal as a *fait accompli*.

It is now apparent that what the US had started in the run-up to Copenhagen, namely to build a more flexible and manageable structure for negotiations between major economies and leading emitters, is likely to reshape climate diplomacy in the coming years. Frustrated by a formulaic and cumbersome UN process and left with only a non-binding Copenhagen Accord, many countries are now considering how to improve the negotiation format. The Obama Administration clearly favours a more selective core group of major emitters that can focus on the key elements of a global deal on emissions, as part of a more flexible multilateral setting. Obama was never likely to sign up to a modified version of the Kyoto Protocol, given the almost taboo nature of the 'K'-word in US domestic politics. For America to re-engage, therefore, a new kind of agreement was needed that was built around a core deal between the US and China.

By forcing this new approach on the rest of the world, the US and the other architects of the Copenhagen Accord may have broken with diplomatic protocol in climate politics. But if a new political structure emerges that better reflects the realities of the international system, then Obama would have provided a form of international leadership that few anticipated. Still, to claim the mantle of global climate leadership, Obama will need to deliver at the domestic level. On this, the jury is still out. ■

Obama Fails to Reverse Gravity: America Continues to Decline

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Taking stock of President Barack Obama's relative progress or failure after a year in office cannot easily be measured in the behavior of American foes as those challenging the US tend to be pushing against American interests no matter who is President. But what of allies?

Four strategically significant allies of the United States – Germany, Japan, Israel and Saudi Arabia – have each been saying “no” to Obama's White House. Each has rebuffed the new President on key Obama policy asks without consequence – this itself illustrating the severe decline in global American power.

The United States and its new President presume that they sit at the head of the global power table, but increasingly, the world sees a formerly great nation that has fallen, that has traded substantive power for pretense, and which is seen as increasingly impotent for not realizing that it must re-earn its leadership rather than asserting illusions.

ASSERTIVE ALLIES

At the London G-20 economic summit while the global economy tilted towards collapse, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's and Barack Obama's polite but serious debate about fiscal expansionary policies vs. fiscal conservatism during the crisis became the distinctive memory of that Summit – overshadowing the swirling efforts of UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nikolas Sarkozy to steal the show. Merkel rebuffed Obama's economic leadership and views, and Obama, swallowing pride, maintained an image of cordiality and friendship with Merkel despite her refusing to budge.

Japan, which like Germany was defeated by the US and then was stood up and rebuilt via American patronage and stewardship, has undergone significant political change with the Democratic Party of Japan's defeat of the long-time ruling Liberal Democratic Party. For years, the United States has acted as if the basic “do what we say” dynamic towards Japan would never be challenged despite a clear domestic struggle over what Japan's emergent national identity should become, over what a healthy nationalism should look like, and how Japan should reposition itself given a fifty year security alliance with the US and the complicating emergence of China.

Japan's Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is apparently trying to demonstrate that America is trailing history rather than leading it, with the US defensively trying to protect a Futenma Air Station base-swapping arrangement made between the environmentally-insensitive and corruption-blind LDP

and George W. Bush's administration. Hatoyama promised during his campaign that the basing deal would not go through, and despite some bludgeoning of Japan's Washington Ambassador by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the issue – and direct pressure from Obama on Prime Minister – Hatoyama has refused to walk the course the United States has been pushing, despite threats that Japan failing to yield might undermine core tenets of the relationship.

Ultimately, the US obsession with the Futenma arrangement shows weakness rather than strength because given China's rise, the US needs Japan's economic and military resources as a full partner, not in ambivalence. The US would be undermining its own security to trade the broad strengths of the US-Japan security relationship with the relatively minor issue of moving the controversial Futenma Air Station – which many don't remember was the very first “deal” done by then-US Ambassador to Japan Walter Mondale and then-Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto in the aftermath of the rape of a 12-year old Japanese girl by three American military servicemen. The deal then was to absorb Futenma into the huge American air base on Okinawa and combine the Air Force and Marine operations within the enormous base land mass already under US control. Ultimately, inter-service rivalry on the American side undermined this keystone of agreement on a number of security revisions in the relationship. Obama and Clinton have shown little historic understanding of the roots of the Futenma problem – but beyond that have rattled sabers in such a way that shows the Obama team is threatening something it can't afford to lose, thus further enhancing the political benefits to Hatoyama of seeming to resist American pressure.

Saudi Arabia is not often acknowledged publicly in Washington as an ally – but in many ways for decades, the Saudis have been America's most significant strategic ally in the Middle East, moving oil production and supply in patterns that helped America's strategic interests and partners. Most recently, the Saudis used their influence on Pakistan in providing subsidized oil to that state to help move

Pakistan to take bolder actions against al Qaeda and Pakistan Taliban groups in the SWAT region. When George W. Bush was running for President, his father arranged for then-Saudi Ambassador to the US Prince Bandar al-Sultan to give secret foreign policy tutorials on the candidate's campaign airplane. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US was allied with the Saudis in arming and equipping the Mujahadeen, many of whose leaders then are US enemies today.

But recently when asked by President Obama to put forward a number of key concessions toward Israel as part of the “opener” in changing the dynamics of Middle East-Israeli antagonism, Saudi Arabia King Abdullah refused. The King had already initiated and resurrected several times a normalization proposal between the Arab League and Israel first offered in Beirut in 2002 – only to see it largely ignored and used occasionally and symbolically by the US administration at moments of political expediency. The King warned President Obama that Israel's new Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, would ultimately embarrass the President and embarrass those who put too much into the ante too soon in restarting the Middle East peace process. Not only did the Saudis rebuff Obama, they proved to be correct – identifying early on that the Obama White House didn't realize that America's superpower status had been punctured badly during the Bush years and that before states would throw their lots solidly behind American leadership, the White House would have to prove that it had power to reshape and sculpt global relationships. Being told to trust responsible behavior by Israel was not a convincing first move by the Obama team toward the Saudis.

Finally, Israel itself said “no” to the United States and Barack Obama in the loudest and most politically consequential way. Largely a client state of the United States, overwhelmingly dependent on US aid and transfer payments as well as an iron-clad security guarantee, Israel's schizophrenic approach to Palestine and a two-state solution has been one of many frustrating realities of the Middle East peace

process. Prime Minister Olmert's government repeatedly and passionately stated that Israel's only chance at survival as a Jewish state and democracy was to make a two state solution work. Prime Minister Netanyahu's government is highly ambivalent at best about the position of the previous government and has done much to undermine any progress in negotiations with the Palestinians.

In order to kick-start the peace process in the wake of the Gaza conflict, Barack Obama selected the distinguished peace-forger and former US Senator George Mitchell to take on the task as envoy. To convince the Arab world it was serious the Obama White House committed itself to pressure Israel to halt all new settlement activity as Israel's ante in the process. This raised hopes in the Arab world that Obama was serious – but raised hackles inside Israel that the US President would ultimately sell out Israel's equities and basic security.

Netanyahu demonstrated his statecraft skills in a high stakes but successful gamble in knocking back Barack Obama. The Prime Minister rebuffed decisively the notion that settlements could be the portal through which Middle East peace talks could be restarted. Consequently, the Obama White House – which often internally compares itself to a hybrid of the Lincoln and Kennedy administrations – found that Netanyahu had become what Khrushchev had been to Kennedy. Netanyahu, an ally, had shown the limits of Barack Obama's power to resculpt Middle East realities – at least so far until there is some escalating political crisis between Israel and the US in which the American President reclaims the heavyweight champion ring from Netanyahu.

Each of these episodes have their distinctive political circumstances and ought to be grouped together only cautiously, but the fact remains that America's allies are rebuffing the US more regularly and overtly than would have been imagined a decade ago. Global analysts often refer to the troubling behavior of problematic nations like Iran or North Korea or non-allies like China and Russia as measures of America's current weak position, but it is in the decisions of allies that the absence of what had been long-established equilibriums becomes clear and worrisome.

Despite the global fascination with Barack Obama and his inspiring oratorical sketches of what the world could expect of itself and what nations could collectively do to meet the enormous challenges ahead, the world at the same time doubts America's ability to achieve the objectives it sets out for itself.

The world sees the US unrealistically threaten Japan with strategic rupture over a minor basing issue on Okinawa where the United States actually maintains 39 separate military installations. It sees the US try to convince the Arab world that it is serious about Israel-Palestine peace by promising a settlement freeze and then reversing itself and acquiescing to Israel's recalcitrant Prime Minister. It sees the long-term, back room managed US-Saudi

relationship contribute nothing to Obama's script for Middle East peacemaking. It sees Barack Obama politely humbled and rebuffed by Germany, a global capital surplus nation, at the London G-20 meeting when Germany's own growth and welfare are tied in part to reflating the US economy which consumes German exports.

A PROGRESSIVE REALIST PATH

America's current national security objectives are greater than its means – and the White House is demonstrating that it can't juggle all of these challenges simultaneously. American power and leverage are being dissipated in too many failed causes. It's time to rethink America's national security course and to re-prioritize its core goals. The key to rebuilding American power is accomplishing something real that the US said it would do – to gain momentum from small success followed by a next success.

Recognizing the constraints today on American power, Obama nonetheless can reinvent America's position by scoring well-thought-out wins by defying conventional wisdom and not giving in to countervailing forces. Restarting a credible Russia-US effort in reducing WMDs and nuclear materials, which the Obama team may pull off, may be one such positive gain. Pushing through normalization of relations between Syria and Israel comes to mind. Ending the restrictions on American citizen travel to Cuba and finally ending an anachronistic Cold War 90 miles of US shores would also buy Obama some global credits.

The key is for the White House to overcome the structural collapse of American power during the Bush years by convincing allies through its prudent actions that America is worth backing again and following. Renewed and refocused momentum in the US foreign policy agenda may convince foes that America's considerable assets would be more shrewdly used to help lead the world into a new, more stable and reorganized equilibrium.

Only this kind of progressive realist path will secure a positive foreign policy legacy for President Barack Obama and assure that the US re-earns its way back to global leadership from its current position as an anachronistic, reactive power falling behind events rather than leading them. ■

Driving Decline?

Economic Crisis and the Rise of China

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Decline, Charles Krauthammer tells his disciples on the American right, is a choice. If only that were so, might be the reaction of a President who has spent his first year in office attempting to make progress on an ambitious foreign policy agenda against the backdrop of diminished American capability, authority and prestige. The United States' ability to influence international politics has been conspicuously limited by two interrelated and reinforcing factors: the fallout, both in terms of the health of America's domestic economy and its neoliberal ideology, of the 2008 financial crisis, and the economic rise and increasing political assertiveness of China. Rebuilding the health of the American economy – and with it, the American system of open-door global capitalism – has of necessity been Obama's top priority, dominating lesser concerns and overriding nobler ambitions.

AMERICA'S 'BOUNCEBACKABILITY'

Whether the twin harbingers of decline – recession and rising powers – can be defeated remains to be seen, but the United States has been here before. The American decline debate is as old as the rise of American power, the zenith of which was reached not in 2001 but in 1945, when the United States accounted for half of the world's economic product and held over two-thirds of the world's gold reserves, a predominance from which decline was inevitable. Real pessimism concerning American vitality surfaced amidst the cultural and economic upheavals of the 1960s, was highlighted by talk of the 'missile gap', confirmed by the twin political shocks-to-the-system of Vietnam and Watergate and laid bare in Carter's now-ridiculed 'malaise speech'. Despite the astonishing demonstration of American technological prowess represented by the moon landings; despite Reagan's 'morning in America' rhetoric, the success in the late 1980s of Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* reflected America's perpetual obsession with its own decline. Indeed, candidate Obama successfully exploited that obsession to base his own election campaign around the attainability of national regeneration.

That Kennedy's book so animated American strategy debates in the early 1990s owed much to a combination of circumstances similar to that which exists today. In this case the rising Asian power was Japan, which had emerged as the world's most competitive economic power and biggest creditor in the 1980s, having exploited the 'new industrial revolution' in manufacturing and invested heavily in research and development. Japan's economy had grown rapidly and consistently as a de facto American protectorate during the Cold War, and by 1991 it was the second-largest economy in the world with growth rates over the previous three years above 5%, whilst in the same year America slipped into recession.

Yet between 1990 and 1998, the US economy grew by twenty-six percent, compared with Europe's seventeen percent and Japan's seven percent. The United States accounted for around one quarter of world GDP throughout the 1990s and remained the most technologically advanced major economy with expenditures on research and development nearly equalling the rest of the G-7 combined. The long boom that came after 1992 even allowed the United States to eradicate its near three-decades-old budget deficit, an achievement that saw Clinton ranked as the most successful President in economic terms since Lyndon Johnson. The United States had managed to extend its lead in every aspect of power capabilities whilst avoiding significant balancing behaviour as other powerful states chose to bandwagon on the back of the renewed American system.

That the United States was able to rise again into a position of unparalleled imperial dominance by the dawn of the twenty-first century should not assuage American policymakers' concerns about the challenges the United States faces in the coming years. Yet it does show that the force and inevitability of decline can be overstated, and that the United States has historically been able to bounce back and prove the prophets of doom wrong. At the same time, the situation Barack Obama has faced since taking office certainly appears more serious – and less easily reversed – than any of the setbacks the United States has encountered since 1945.

RECESSION OR CRISIS?

When the collapse of Lehmann brothers precipitated a massive financial crisis, and, on one reading of the opinion polls, the election of Barack Obama, comparisons abounded with the Great Depression of the 1930s. In order to avoid a prolonged and globalised depression, Western economies, and in particular the United States, were forced to undertake coordinated central banking interventions, directly capitalise and in some cases nationalize financial institutions, and inject massive fiscal stimulus into their broader economies. Despite the stimulus, US unemployment rose to its highest levels since the early 1980s, and the cost of preventing a more serious economic meltdown left the United States facing a budget deficit in 2009 equivalent to 13.5% of GDP.

Yet underlying the talk of credit default swaps, mortgage backed securities and collateralized debt obligations is something far more fundamental than a banking-crisis precipitated recession, even one as globalised and deep as this one. It is the loss of confidence in the very system of neoliberal international capitalism that was so lauded at the end of the Cold War and which sustained the long boom of the 1990s. That the future of global capitalism in its current form has been put up for reconsideration strikes at the heart of American structural power, from the role of the dollar as the reserve currency to the international institutions and policies of the 'Washington Consensus'. Even the previous strength of the American economy itself began to look illusory, having been underpinned by unsustainable rises in house prices and debt-based consumer spending.

The economic challenge that Obama faced was therefore twofold: first, to return the US economy to sustainable growth, and second, to rebuild confidence in the structures of the international financial system, the central element of America's uniquely advantageous structural power in the international system. At the same time, the United States' position as the guarantor of international economic and political order is being challenged by the most populous nation on the planet.

THE CHINESE ALTERNATIVE

Chinese foreign policy has grown increasingly assertive since its accession to the WTO in 2001 gave it greater access to export markets and fuelled average growth rates of ten percent as exports to the United States alone rose more than threefold. By the end of 2009 China looked to have overtaken Germany to become the world's biggest exporter and is expected to leapfrog Japan to become the world's second-largest economy in 2010. This growth, fuelled by China's huge stocks of cheap labour and aggressive currency controls to keep the value of the yuan low, created both massive cash surpluses and a hugely increased demand for raw materials, a combination that has allowed and mandated a more expansionary foreign policy on the part of the Chinese government.

One the one hand China has used its export earnings to invest heavily in its military capabilities. Confident in its land security where once it worried about the Soviet Union's Red Army, China has embarked on a shipbuilding policy that some estimates suggest will result in it having more ships than the US Navy in the next decade. Already China's naval reach has been felt in the Gulf of Aden, where it has undertaken anti-piracy patrols and proposed the construction of a permanent naval base. China's increasing military assertiveness – and its sense of regional influence – was hinted at by the CCP's criticism of the US's decision to sell almost \$1 billion in anti-missile batteries and missiles to Taiwan, and graphically illustrated by China's test of its own missile-intercept systems, which unusually was publicly reported – apparently as an explicit response to the Taiwanese sales. With the United States legally bound to provide for Taiwan's defense under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and with considerable pressure from hawkish Republicans in Congress to that end, the Obama administration will continue to walk a tightrope to manage tensions with a Chinese government increasingly forceful on the issue of Taipei's independence.

On the other hand China's resource requirements have extended its interests in other regions of the world from which it imports its raw materials. Domestic energy requirements have seen the Middle East become an increasingly important region for China, from where it imports 60% of its oil, in particular Saudia Arabia and Iran, which constitute the bulk of those imports, and to a lesser extent Oman and Yemen. Competition for resources in this vital region sees Chinese interests come into direct conflict with those of the United States, in particular over the possibility of imposing sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme. Further afield China has invested heavily in African development in return for rights to natural resources including oil in Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Sudan, copper in Zambia and the DRC, iron ore in Gabon, and minerals and precious metals in South Africa. Crucially, unlike the United States or the European Union, China's policy does not link trade and investment to political reform or human rights issues, creating a genuine and attractive alternative to Western development norms – a "Beijing Consensus" for resource-rich developing nations. This guarantee of non-interference gives China an advantage with less legitimate regimes in the region, as evidenced by China's staunch support of President Mugabe in Zimbabwe, as well as access to export markets for Chinese goods, in particular textiles. In Latin America China has stepped into the United States' back-yard with cheque-book diplomacy in Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina and Brazil.

This extension of Chinese interests and its willingness to play more of a traditional great power role reflects the shifting balance in the international system away from American dominance. In this sense the flipside of China's rise is American decline. For the United States, the days of being the world's biggest creditor are long gone – it is now the world's biggest debtor, and China is the largest overseas holder of U.S. debt instruments: \$2.27 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, the world's largest cache, most of which is in dollar-denominated bonds. Yet, as was the case with the alarmism surrounding the rise of the Japanese economy in the late 1980s, the implications of China's dollar holdings can be overstated. America's indebtedness does not place China in a position of dominance over the United States, far from it - American consumers remain the guarantors of Chinese growth, and by extension, the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. What it does mean is that the United States and China are locked together in a symbiotic relationship that seems destined to define international relations over the coming years, and Obama has been quick to understand that and to treat China as the United States' 'most-favoured nation' in diplomatic as well as economic terms: dropping references to Chinese human rights abuses and seeking out President Hu Jintao first at every major international summit.

SOFTLY DOES IT

In the 1990s the Clinton administration was able to play hardball with Japan – effectively a US protectorate since 1945 – in order to force favourable trade agreements and enhance American economic interests. China, however is different, and the US doesn't hold the position of strength that it did vis-à-vis Japan then. The Obama administration has wisely sought to reach out to China rather than treat it as a rival to avoid creating any insecurities within the Chinese government that might lead it to increase the pace of its military buildups or seek to present itself as an explicit alternative to American power in international relations more generally. In this sense mollifying China buys time for the United States to rebuild its economic fundamentals.

At the same time the United States retains a number of significant – and arguably fundamental – advantages over China that inspire confidence over the long term and which should assuage calls for short-termist and potentially destabilising policies to contain Chinese ambitions. Internally, the tensions between an open economy and a closed politics will only increase as China continues to grow, until either productivity or social stability are sacrificed at the altar of the other. Indeed, the liberal ideals often associated with American foreign policy and which neoconservative critics have accused Obama of abandoning in his foreign policy continue to operate without the explicit backing of American public diplomacy,

as Google's apparent willingness to take on the CCP over internet censorship demonstrates. Moreover, China still has a very long way to go before it has satisfied the demands of its own citizens sufficiently that it can turn to focus its attention on international leadership: Chinese per capita income remains less than one-eighth of America's. As James Fallows recently pointed out in *The Atlantic*, American 'decline' is from a level that most of the world still envies.

Internationally, America's political leadership endures. Whilst the misadventure in Iraq may have dealt a blow to America's ability to mount unilateral interventions, the fact remains that where such interventions may be required the world must apply to American power in pursuit of American principles. Obama's reversion to the type of multilateralism that characterized the earlier parts of Clinton's administration is therefore less a sign of American decline than it is an indication that this administration recognizes the value of America's soft and structural power in a way that its predecessor did not, and is seeking to protect and consolidate those assets.

Critics such as Robert Kagan argue that this move is accommodationist and that the Obama administration has rejected an enduring tradition in American foreign policy of perpetuating American primacy in favour of seeking to manage what it regards as America's unavoidable decline. Yet Obama's engagement of China as a strategic partner, far from breaking with established norms of American diplomacy, stands in line with forty years of Sino-American cooperation going back to Nixon. Rather than being the architect of a post-American world, the President's strategy is based around the need to restore the legitimacy of American leadership, and in doing so to prevent other powers from seeking or offering an alternative. Gaining Chinese assent for renewed American leadership is the first and most fundamental step in that strategy, which, far from being declinist, seeks to revive American power and standing from its nadir in Iraq.

That the United States will be able to recover the kind of multi-faceted dominance it held at the dawn of this century is profoundly unlikely, the dangers of such unipolarity having been exposed to the world by the policies of the Bush administration. Yet to view this as confirmation of American decline is as misguided as it would be to claim that European recovery after the Second World War undermined the power of the United States. International power, influence and leadership is not a zero-sum game, and on the evidence of the first cautious year of foreign policy under Obama, the United States has a President who recognizes that. ■

Barack Obama's Nobel Prize: A Debate

This debate took place on the IDEAS blog in the days after the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Barack Obama, just a few weeks into his Presidential term.

Arne Westad - This is a Nobel for good intentions rather than for achievements. Since Obama had been in office for all of a week and a half when the deadline for nominations ran out (on 1 February), it is obviously the promise of Obama that is being rewarded. In this sense it is probably first and foremost intended as a prize to the Americans for having had the courage to elect him. But it is hard to claim that the prize is going to the one who has done most for the cause of peace over the past year.

Nicholas Kitchen - It's hard to see that this can be a Nobel Prize 'for' anything - whilst the committee can always make decision after the end of nominations and do not have to draw solely from the official list of nominees, what exactly is Barack Obama supposed to have actually done to merit the award?

Nigel Ashton - This is the Nobel Prize for hope. You can't make a case that Obama has achieved anything yet in terms of ending the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq or Israel/Palestine. It's also the Nobel Prize for not being George Bush.

George Lawson - The Nobel Foundation has had its fair share of odd moments. In its time, it has nominated Stalin and Mussolini, ignored Churchill and Ghandi and given the peace prize to Henry Kissinger and Theodore Roosevelt, neither of whom can exactly be regarded as peaceniks. Awarding the prize to a president who, by his own admission, has barely even started to make an impact on the world stage is right up there amongst the committee's quirkiest decisions.

Danny Quah - I think the Global Financial Crisis and the trillions of dollars the international community committed to global rescue has thrown into disarray all semblance of calm, reasoned, longer-term thinking in anything but the hard sciences [in which I would include Physiology or Medicine] and, paradoxically, the higher, more abstract realms of thinking [Literature]. In between - Peace, Economics - everyone has been only grabbing at straws and even, perhaps with hindsight years from now, decisions that might eventually turn out to be wise will right now seem knee-jerk and unthinking.

Mick Cox - Am I the only one who thinks it may have been a very good idea to have awarded President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize? We can of course twitter on about it being too premature and all that. However, we do need to remind ourselves why he may have been considered fit for the peace prize. After all, in less than a year, Obama has talked seriously about nuclear disarmament, made a real effort to overcome the divide between the West and the Moslem world, done something to restore the peace process in the Middle East, kept open some line of communication to the Iranians when urged not to, got rid of a provocative Ballistic Missile system in Europe, tried to defrost the US relationship with Russia, moved quickly to maintain good relations with China, led enthusiastically

on global warming, made evident his desire to seek some new deal with Cuba, and stressed the need for the United States to work with and through the UN. Indeed, in his speech to the UN he even defined security in ways that should have warmed the cockles of every cosmopolitan and world society heart. So what is so bizarre about the decision?

NK - Perhaps the fact that on each of these issues any 'progress' is at best encouraging first steps. Even on Guantanamo, the key 'peace'-related pledge of the campaign, is not closed yet, and the practice has proved more difficult than the good intentions.

NA - Probably the most bizarre element of the announcement was the emphasis placed on Obama's supposed quest to rid the world of nuclear weapons. This part of his agenda isn't even supposed to be achievable.

Charlotte Armah - When I first heard of the award - I was surprised. 'So soon?' I thought and then I smiled as I realised that I had tacitly accepted that he was a contender and was just quibbling over the timing. Even John Bolton's whinge is not that Obama was awarded the Prize, but that it seems to go to Democratic US presidents! So what exactly is the issue here? That Obama was awarded the prize at all or that he has been awarded the prize so early into his presidency that he has not had time to achieve anything significantly concrete to deserve the award?

AW - Certainly within the United States, there is the danger of the Peace Prize being seen as Norway's way of rewarding liberal US leaders just for being liberal.

NK - The Right are going to have a field day: for the listeners of Limbaugh the only thing worse than a liberal is a liberal who's feted by Europeans.

GL - But you can see where the decision is coming from. It has hardly been a vintage year for peace. The world is a mess and Obama, for many people, is its best hope. There is going to be little progress in the Middle East, Afghanistan or any other global hotspot without active engagement from the US government. And undeniably, the president and his advisers have been nothing if not active over the past

few months. However, initiatives don't always yield outcomes and it is not yet clear whether Obama's presidency will succeed, or offer a 21st century rerun of the Carter administration, another occasion when a relatively inexperienced president scored high on hope, but low on delivery.

AW - It's certainly a sign of how oriented towards US affairs the Nobel Committee is. It's easier to encourage someone of promise and power than rewarding those who take risks for the cause of peace and human rights - say, Chinese dissidents or Iraqi critics of the occupation

DQ - The first thought I had when I saw the blogosphere reaction to the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate was, Thank goodness, this takes the heat off Economics - nothing that happens Monday will be worse than what's just happened with Peace. My second thought was, Well, actually, maybe not. I figure that this only rounds up a terrible year since September 2008. The various Nobel Committees here should have just called the whole thing off this year - stopped early for lunch and quietly gone home.

MC - There have certainly been odder - and less defensible - decisions made by the "Committee" in the past. What about Woodrow Wilson (who loved the Old South and opposed racial equality)? Menachem Begin (a terrorist in some people's opinion), Mother Teresa (who seemed to love other people's poverty while hating condoms)? And of course, dear Henry K. the man who gave so many green lights to so many horrible regimes and dictators in the Third World that one wonders why he was never arraigned for crimes against humanity.

DQ - I don't discount the reaction from the wired masses - even if I reserve the right to disagree with them. They are literate and numerous (the ones I read, anyway), and the integrated weight of their judgement is, after all, the coalface where both peace and social science scratch global reality. But I thought most telling in all the lamenting and complaining on Obama's being awarded the Prize, I have heard no strong well-defined, anywhere close to a majority, statement of the kind "It should have been X instead." The controversy surrounding Obama's

being awarded the Prize is not that his actions have taken the world forwards in some people's eyes, and backwards in others. That we could live with, and indeed, it is that that has formed the controversy in all previous Laureates. In this case, however, the controversy, if you want to call it that, is that there has been yet either no action or no result. The difficulty is there was no one else the Nobel Committee could have turned to instead to award their Prize. In these circumstances, the Nobel Committee should have just shut down for the year.

NK - It's certainly an odd assumption to make that the world merits an annual award of this nature - the absence of standout candidates shouldn't mean we plump for potential.

CA - I'm not an academic or an IR expert so I can't debate whether there have been worthier winners or if someone more deserving was overlooked. I agree with Danny that it's very telling that the outcry is not 'It should have gone to fill in the blank.' I would point to the fact that there is almost no international issue in which the transformational impact of positive US engagement is not considered a critical success factor - whether it's Iran, Korea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, nuclear proliferation, the Middle East peace process, climate change, or the global economic and financial crises.

GL - In truth, awarding the prize to Obama is likely to have little substantive effect on the prospects for peaceful change around the world. Far more important will be what goes on beneath the surface of these global celebrity contests - in the nitty gritty of debates in Washington, Tehran, Moscow and elsewhere. But that is not really the point. The prize is a symbol, partly given it must be said, out of fear that things could get worse before they get better. Just as his failure to swing crucial IOC votes to Chicago's unsuccessful Olympic bid did not destroy - or even significantly dent - Obama's appeal abroad, the award of the Nobel Prize is likely to end up as a minor footnote on a busy presidency. Obama can afford to win - or lose - the world's beauty pageants. But there are other, much thornier, aspects of world politics where he cannot afford to fail.

MC - That's right: moreover, if we were to be real purists, then why fetishize the prize at all? Set up by a Swede who made a fortune from wars - perhaps we should be arguing against the prize in toto rather than against specific individuals who have won it. So let's not join the hue and cry. Lots of people have already attacked the decision including some sympathetic to Obama himself. But many have not - including a very large number of people with the least power and influence who, rightly or wrongly, see Obama not as an American but as a symbol of hope in a world where there isn't much of that commodity going around right now.

CA - We all saw the way the US presidential campaign captured international imagination - who would have thought that the French (the French, for God's sake) would be clamouring to meet a black US president! These are unprecedented times on just about any level we can think of - and in Obama, we currently have an international leader of the superpower that has this incredible impact on people. When was the last time we saw world leaders jostling each other to have their picture taken with the US president or seasoned, hard bitten journalists using their camera phones to take pictures for themselves after they'd taken pictures for their newspaper or magazine? We can sit and debate whether or not Obama is a worthy winner, or if this impact will last and all sorts of logic. Sometimes, we just analyse too much. And sometimes it's as simple and as complex as needing hope and finding it in a single individual. Maybe, it's not a bad thing for him to have received an award so early in his Presidency that reminds him, it's not just the hopes of the American people he carries on his shoulders.

NK - This may however be exactly the kind of thing that creates domestic barriers to the achievement of those hopes. A good deal of the American people resent being constantly called upon to be the world's saviour and punish Presidents who value international acclaim over America's domestic priorities or national interest. In that sense, the Nobel committee, in seeking to encourage the early initiatives of the Obama administration, may have created a rod for the President's back. ■



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