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Obama's 100 Days in Foreign Policy: Triumph of the Personal

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In his first 100 days in office, President Barack Obama completed two whirlwind tours of Europe and Latin America. His message on both continents was simple: America has made many mistakes in the past, but we're ready now to listen to others and be more flexible. It was a hugely popular message that brought him thunderous applause, particularly when he criticized or apologized for America—to an extent that no other sitting American President had done before on foreign soil.

The question is whether the President's personal popularity abroad is translating into concrete results for the United States. So far it has not. There has been no outpouring of foreign support for U.S. priorities and initiatives. Moreover, on almost every issue, he has raised expectations of great change in U.S. policy but then pulled back when it became apparent that he could not meet his promises. His trips have largely been gestures focused more on his person than on policy, and the jury is still out as to whether this is merely a conceit carried over from the presidential campaign or an intentional strategy to redefine the nature of American leadership.

The problem with promoting the person of the President as a stand-in for U.S. interests is that it leaves America vulnerable to the priorities of others. It is not all that difficult to get applause from foreign audiences when you embrace their priorities and criticize your own country. The hard part of leadership is getting others to follow when they are reluctant to do so. Except for some minor instances—or when Obama simply embraced already existing

policies of foreign governments—he has gotten precious little for his efforts.

That is the main lesson from the first 100 days: It is time for President Obama to begin focusing on the hard work of protecting America and asserting U.S. leadership, not by trying to enhance his personal popularity abroad, but by cashing in on that popularity for the benefit of his country. He should stop pretending that our interests always coincide with others—as if America were merely the chairman of the board of international consensus—and start discerning more astutely when they do and when they do not. He is the President of all Americans, and he should start acting that way.

Lost Opportunities. President Obama's personal appeal was obvious at every stop in Europe and Latin America. No matter where he went, political leaders rushed to shake his hand and have their pictures taken with him.

Yet behind the scenes, Obama was not receiving the respect you might expect from someone who was obviously trying so hard to ingratiate himself with his foreign hosts. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, told some parliament members that he found the new American President inde-

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cisive, inexperienced, and clueless about Europe's plans on climate change.¹ Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, then president of the European Union, called Obama's request for others to follow his lead and increase their own economic stimulus packages "a way to hell" that would "undermine the stability of the global financial market."²

Much of Obama's foreign policy agenda in his first 100 days has been to reach out to those who have been most critical of America, like France, and to some of its most determined adversaries, such as Iran and Russia. He gave his very first televised interview, in fact, to an Arab television network, saying to his Muslim audiences that "all too often the United States starts by dictating."³ In a video to the Iranian people, he made no mention of human rights, instead focusing on a "shared hope" for peace.⁴ Shortly into his first term as President, we found out that Obama had sent a secret letter to Russian President Dmitri Medvedev indicating that he would consider foregoing missile defenses in Europe if Russia helped the U.S. convince Iran to forego its nuclear program.

Yet even those efforts gained little for the U.S. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini responded in a televised address by saying that the U.S. is "hated in the world," that we should stop interfering in other countries' affairs, and if America didn't change her ways, "divine customs and nations" would soon "change her."⁵ Medvedev replied by acknowledging that he got Obama's secret letter, but roundly

rejected any such linkages between Iran and missile defenses.⁶ And while NATO allies did agree to a modest increase of personnel to Afghanistan, they did not give Obama the combat troops that he claimed he needed—and which he promised during the campaign that he would deliver.

At the same time he reached out to U.S. critics, he played down the interests and concerns of some of our best allies. When Obama visited the Czech Republic, whose leaders supported our efforts to deploy missile defenses for Europe, he acknowledged the growing need for such defenses. Yet he then turned around and undermined that message by saying he would not proceed with deployment unless missile defenses are "proven" to work.⁷ As anyone familiar with the technology of these systems knows, that is a false issue; the missile defense interceptors that could be deployed in Europe are largely the same as the ones already operational in Alaska.

President Obama took much the same approach at the G-20 meeting. Though he had the ears of the world, he chose not to defend America or its free-market system and capitalism, which has helped to lift more people out of poverty than any other economic system in history. Instead, he agreed with foreign complaints that America bears most of the blame for the wrongdoings that brought down the global financial system. Little of merit was accomplished at the meetings, which Sarkozy later characterized as a defeat for "the Anglo-Saxon financial model."⁸

1. Charles Bremner, "Sarkozy Snipes at 'Dim' Spanish PM and 'Weak' Barack Obama," *The Times* (London), April 17, 2009, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6106250.ece>.
2. Steven Erlanger and Stephen Castle, "European Leader Assails American Stimulus Plan," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/26/world/europe/26czech.html?hp>.
3. Al Arabiya, "President Gives First Interview Since Taking Office to Arab TV," January 27, 2009, at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65087.html#004>.
4. "Videotaped Remarks by the President in Celebration of Mowruz," White House Press Office, March 20, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Videotaped-Remarks-by-The-President-in-Celebration-of-Nowruz.
5. Office of the Supreme Leader, "IRI Nation Can Not Be Deceived or Intimidated," March 21, 2009, at www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?content>Show&id=5071.
6. Ellen Barry, "Russia Welcomes Letter from Obama," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/04/washington/04russia.html?ref=world>.
7. Kathleen Moore and Brian Whitmore, "Obama, in Prague, Calls for Elimination of Nuclear Weapons," RFE/RL, April 5, 2009, at http://www.rferl.org/content/Obama_Calls_For_Elimination_Of_Nuclear_Weapons_In_Prague_Speech/1602285.html.
8. "G-20 Has Given Us a Package for Tomorrow, Not Today," *Business Day*, April 6, 2009, at <http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/topstories.asp?ID=BD4A975322>.

In Latin America, Obama again lost opportunities to explain and defend American interests. He shook hands three different times with the deeply anti-American Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and smilingly accepted his gift of a decades-old book riddled with anti-American arguments. He did not use the opportunity to discuss either the Venezuelan troops stationed along Colombia's border or the FARC rebels hiding with them, or the diesel-powered submarines and arms that Chavez is buying from Russia.⁹ He also listened politely to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's almost hour-long tirade primarily against America.

What President Obama should have done at the Summit of the Americas is call a meeting on the side with our trading partners and allies in the region—with Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Peru. It would have been an excellent platform from which the leader of the world's most productive economy could have championed the merits of open trade, highlighted best practices for addressing some of the recent stresses to global economies, and discussed shared concerns.

Pandering Begets Disrespect—and Worse. The problem with the type of “engagement” we've seen thus far is that, at some point, foreign leaders begin to see it (correctly) as pandering. In the hard world of international policies, respect is prized more highly than affection, personal or otherwise. President Obama's apologies for U.S. policies are interpreted in North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela not as an honest act of attrition that should elicit reciprocity from them, but rather as an apology demanding more concessions from the United States.

Such an approach has already backfired. After announcing that his Administration would now

actively participate in international talks with Iran over its nuclear program, even if Iran did not first suspend its uranium enrichment activities as the U.N. Security Council resolutions on Iran demand, Iran openly inaugurated its first nuclear fuel production complex.¹⁰ This will allow it to produce uranium fuel for its heavy-water reactor in Arak. But it also could enable Iran to eventually produce the plutonium and highly-enriched uranium it needs for nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran is a fearsome possibility, and intelligence sources have said we may actually be just months away from that reality.¹¹

Adding insult to affront, that same day, Iran charged an American freelance journalist, Roxana Saberi, with spying.¹² Her case is being described as little more than a bargaining chip for Iran in future negotiations with the West. Ahmadinejad dangled prospects for her release as a kind of *quid pro quo* for our help in securing the release of five Iranians jailed in Iraq.¹³ The Obama Administration has responded by threatening more serious sanctions.

Matters did not go much better with North Korea. After the Obama Administration unrealistically raised expectations that the change in U.S. leadership would lead North Korea to become more accommodating, Pyongyang escalated tensions by testing a long-range ballistic missile in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions. Facing a test of whether his actions would match his rhetoric, Obama fell back on threatening sanctions at the United Nations. When the U.N. Security Council responded with a weak, nonbinding statement criticizing the launch, the North Koreans promptly announced that they would not only abandon the Six Party Talks, but also resume reprocessing plutonium for additional nuclear weapons. With less than 85 days in office, Obama faced the growing sense

9. RIA Novosti, “Russia to Finance Venezuelan Submarine Deal,” April 4, 2008, at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2008/04/mil-080404-rianovosti03.htm>.

10. Julian Borger, “Iran Moves Step Closer to Realising Nuclear Ambitions,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2009, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/09/iran-nuclear-plant-opens>.

11. DEBKAfile, “Iran Could Produce First Nuke in 60 Days with 7,000 Centrifuges Working 24/7—Western Experts,” *Special Report*, April 6, 2009, at <http://www.debka.com/headline.php?hid=6035>.

12. Thomas Erdbrink, “U.S. Journalist Held in Iran Faces Charges of Spying,” *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2009, p. A8, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/08/AR2009_040801504.html.

13. D. Ibrahimova, “Saberi's Conviction Is Iran's ‘Bargaining Chip’ in Relations with West,” April 22, 2009, at <http://news-en.trend.az/important/exclusive/1459094.html>.

that Pyongyang's belligerence is not merely a negotiating ploy but is instead designed to secure North Korea's recognition as a nuclear weapons state.

Even better known than the North Korea issue is the famous effort to "reset" relations with Russia. At the G-20, President Medvedev called President Obama a "comrade" who is "totally different" from his predecessor. But so far, it has been a one-way street from Washington to Moscow. Russia has done precious little to pressure the Iranians, but it did pressure Kyrgyzstan to evict the U.S. military from the Manas Air Base, a key cargo hub for NATO and U.S. troops going to and coming from Afghanistan.¹⁴ Moscow also announced the construction of five new military bases in the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia¹⁵ and sent up to 5,000 troops to each region. These deployments violate the spirit and the letter of the cease-fire between Georgia and Russia¹⁶ and pose a threat to the East-West energy and transportation corridor.¹⁷

For years, Moscow has wanted to restart strategic arms negotiations, mainly to focus future cuts on U.S. bombers and other strategic systems in which Russia thinks America has an advantage. In an age when Cold War-style arms talks between Washington and Moscow are but a sideshow to the larger issue of nuclear proliferation to terrorists and rogue states, Obama's biggest nuclear arms initiative so far has been to restart these talks with Russia. Despite this gift to Moscow, the Russians announced that the current economic crisis will not derail its plans to modernize its nuclear forces and anti-satellite capabilities.¹⁸ They also insisted that they would not put tactical nuclear weapons—the very systems most threatening to our allies in Europe—on the table.

What is worse, the Russians now have an opportunity to link deployment of U.S. missile defense sites in Europe not only to progress on these arms talks, but also to other geopolitical issues, such as pressuring Georgia, which Moscow has been doing all year long. Now if Russia invades Georgia, we will have to choose between shutting down these arms talks, which some will say is necessary for U.S. security, or criticizing Russia's intervention in Georgia. This would be tantamount to checkmate for Moscow.

The Great Spending Spree Exception: National Defense. Despite spending trillions of dollars on domestic programs, President Obama is proposing to cut the defense budget. The budget cuts would cap the F-22 fighter fleet at some 60 aircraft less than the Air Force last fall said it needed to maintain America's air superiority against Russian and Chinese fighters. He also plans to delay the Navy's next-generation cruiser, a step that could leave the U.S. military's forward bases vulnerable to emerging air and ballistic missile threats. And he wants to slash the very capabilities that we will need to defend against future long-range missiles fielded by Iran and North Korea.

History shows that the United States can afford to spend about 4 percent of its gross domestic output on defense. Yet Obama's core defense budget for 2010 would come in below that amount by some \$27 billion. Even worse, it would continue to fall to some 3.3 percent of GDP by 2014. In fact, defense cuts for these years could be even deeper as the Administration folds war costs into the regular budget instead of supplemental budgets.

14. Ariel Cohen, "U.S.–Russian Relations After Manas: Do Not Push the Reset Button Yet," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2286, February 10, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm2286.cfm>.

15. Ariel Cohen, "How the Obama Administration Should Engage Russia," Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, March 19, 2009, at <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2009/CohenTestimony090319a.pdf>.

16. U.S. Department of State, "Russian Bases in Georgia," February 6, 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/02/116247.htm> (February 27, 2009).

17. Svante E. Cornell, "Pipeline Power: The War in Georgia and the Future of the Caucasian Energy Corridor," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2009), at <http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/scornell/GJIA-2009.pdf> (February 27, 2009).

18. Dov Zakheim, "Security Challenges Arising from the Global Economic Crisis," Statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, March 11, 2009, at http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/FC031109/Zakheim_Testimony031109.pdf (April 24, 2009).

When, even by President Obama's admission, the world is still a very dangerous place, why he would decide to show budget austerity in this one area of national defense is puzzling indeed. It surely cannot be because he feels there is not enough money for it. The \$5.5 billion real reduction Obama would make in total defense spending from fiscal year 2009 to FY 2010 is less than the amount he approved last month to spend on the more than 8,000 earmarks in the spending bill.¹⁹ The only reliable conclusion one can draw is that he simply believes national defense is not a priority.

Consider missile defenses. The same week North Korea tested a long-range missile, the Pentagon announced a \$1.4 billion cut in America's missile-defense budget. Under the knife would be programs that could defend against long-range missile attacks from North Korea as well as Iran—both regimes that are overtly hostile to America. Defenses against short-range missiles are fine, but short-range missiles are not the ones that could most threaten the United States. Those include the Taepodong-2 missile that North Korea tested on April 5. When it is fully deployed, it could reach Alaska and California.

Programs also facing cuts include Ground-Based Interceptors (GBI), Airborne Lasers (ABL), Multiple Kill Vehicles (MKV), and the Space Tracking and Surveillance System (SSTS) sensor program. The GBI system is the only operational one capable of destroying a Taepodong-2 missile as it approaches the U.S. mainland. Shorter-range missiles that we fire from our Aegis ships could defend Japan, Guam, and perhaps Hawaii; but currently, they can do nothing to stop a missile that is on a trajectory to hit Alaska or California. We have 33 GBIs already deployed or soon to be deployed in Alaska and California, and the military already had approval to deploy up to a total of 44 by 2011. But Obama's budget would hold that at 33.

Even less understandable is the decision to cut the Multiple Kill Vehicle program. The MKV is designed to destroy not only missile stages, but multiple warheads deployed in space. It is not yet fully developed, but there are no discernable problems

that would account for a delay in development. The same is true for the SSTS program, which would enable us to distinguish between real warheads and decoys released in space to confuse our interceptors. Both programs could mean the difference in defending against an enemy's effort to overwhelm our missile defense system with countermeasures. It would be understandable if we could not afford such missile defenses, but the \$1.4 billion cut from the missile defense budget alone is only 0.04 percent of the overall proposed federal budget.

Hide That Continuity. Strangely enough, where President Obama has done best in foreign policy is precisely in those areas where he continued President Bush's policies. Obama's strategy in Afghanistan is not all that different from what Bush would have done; in fact, the strategies were largely designed by General David Petraeus, who was appointed by Bush. The same is true in Iraq.

Except for some minor changes on Cuba, the same is even true with respect to Latin America. After all the hypercriticism of Guantanamo Bay during the campaign, President Obama postponed shutting it down for a year. Knowing full well that this will not make him popular with his liberal base, he goes out of his way to hide the fact that he's continuing Bush's policies. But this doesn't change the fact he's doing best in policies that were largely crafted by someone else.

Endearment Is Not Leadership. It may be that President Obama believes he can talk his way out of international conflict, perhaps to enable him better to focus on his domestic agenda, but international politics abhors an American vacuum—and make no mistake, that is how President Obama's "endearment" strategy will eventually be interpreted even in the capitals of Europe. There is only one thing that worries our allies abroad more than an overly assertive U.S. strategy, and that is when America appears to be weak and vacillating.

Foreign policy is not ultimately about good intentions. Yes, symbolism and gestures are not unimportant. And, yes, we should always strive to explain ourselves adequately to foreign audiences.

19. Stephen Thomma and David Lightman, "Obama Decries Earmarks, Signs Law with 9,000 of Them," McClatchey Newspapers, March 1, 2009, at http://news.yahoo.com/s/mcclatchy/20090311/pl_mcclatchy/3186392.

And, yes, it is true that brute force without smart diplomacy is not always effective. But we should never confuse engagement with pandering. At some point, even the Europeans will tire of Obama's *mea culpas*, particularly if they perceive them to be an excuse for pulling back from the responsibilities of American leadership.

It is too early to tell whether these mistakes are the result of inexperience or an intentional strategy.

We can only hope the former and not the latter. Otherwise, we may be in for a wild international ride of the sort we have not seen since the Carter years.

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