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The Invisible Secretary of State: Hillary Clinton's Failure of Leadership on the World Stage

Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.

As secretary of state, Hillary Clinton has been almost as elusive as the Scarlet Pimpernel. Her profile on the world stage has been significantly lower than that of her immediate predecessors, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, who were highly prominent figures in their first six months in office. In marked contrast, Clinton has struggled to make her mark as an international leader and has on several occasions been embarrassingly overshadowed by Vice President Joe Biden on foreign affairs issues ranging from Israel to Iraq. She has also been marginalized by the White House's appointment of a series of special envoys and special representatives on issues such as the Middle East peace process, Sudan, and Afghanistan/Pakistan.

Clinton's low-key and at times overly cautious approach is symbolic of the Obama Administration's floundering foreign policy—one significantly lacking in coherence and direction. Her underwhelming address to the Council on Foreign Relations¹ in Washington this week merely reinforced the image of a confused foreign policy and an American leadership hugely uncomfortable with the idea of a United States as the world's only superpower.

Lacking in strength and vision, and extraordinarily naïve for a post-9/11 world, Clinton's see-no-evil-hear-no-evil speech was one of the weakest delivered by a secretary of state in modern times. It was a speech that could easily have been written by a bureaucrat sitting in Brussels or Turtle Bay, surveying an imaginary world where the United States is

merely one of several equal players rather than the most powerful nation on the face of the earth.

Clinton's Council on Foreign Relations Speech. Despite being her most important speech so far as secretary of state, Hillary Clinton's July 15 address to the Council on Foreign Relations failed to make an impact. It was more a damp squib rather than a powerful policy statement—largely a tired retread of the failing foreign policy doctrine of “smart power” instead of a clear-headed assessment of major foreign policy challenges.

Clinton's speech was full of grand references to “creative partnerships for development,” a “multi-partner world,” and a new “architecture of global cooperation” but remarkably short on clear policy prescriptions. Strikingly, the United States' most important international partnership, the Anglo-American Special Relationship, was not even mentioned.

Clinton's speech was also distinctly lacking in any serious assessment of the huge threats faced by the United States from an array of state and non-state actors alike, including rogue regimes such as Iran and North Korea as well as a global network of Islamist terrorists. There was no sense

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at all that the U.S. was engaged in a global war against an enemy seeking America's destruction or that Washington was faced with an array of adversaries seeking to dominate Asia and the Middle East through nuclear might.

Missile defense, a vital component of any preparation against future attack by Iran or North Korea, did not even merit a mention, nor did the sacrifice and service of hundreds of thousands of American servicemen and women bravely defending the free world. Finally, the secretary of state spent little time discussing the importance of human rights and barely mentioned the concept of freedom—a significant exclusion.

Given the number of critical issues garnering little or no mention, it is clear that the CFR speech was a hugely idealistic exercise in wishful thinking at a time when the world has never been more dangerous.

A Flawed Strategy of Engagement. The naïve principle of “engagement” lay at the very heart of Clinton's CFR speech. The rising threat from Pyongyang barely merited discussion in Clinton's analysis, except for a rather optimistic boast about “two unanimous Security Council resolutions with real teeth and consequences for North Korea.” The secretary of state pointedly avoided any direct criticism of Kim Jong-Il and his tyrannical regime and made no reference at all to the fact that North Korea had recently fired a range of ballistic missiles and even tested a nuclear bomb. The mass starvation of millions of North Koreans by the regime in Pyongyang was also conveniently swept under the carpet, as was continuing human rights violations by China and Russia.

Nor did Clinton directly condemn Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by name, or any other of the country's Islamist rulers, for the brutal murder and suppression of protestors on the streets of Tehran following last month's rigged elections. While conceding that she was “appalled by the manner in which the government used violence to quell the voices of the Iranian people,” Clinton made it clear she remained firmly committed to

direct talks with Tehran over Iran's nuclear ambitions and emphasized “the importance of offering to engage Iran and giving its leaders a clear choice.” There was no reference to what measures the United States and its allies should take against Iran if it failed to halt its uranium enrichment program, thereby neutering any threats of further economic and political sanctions—let alone the potential use of military power.

In contrast to her tough rhetoric on the Iranian nuclear issue when she campaigned for the presidency, Hillary Clinton has adopted a remarkably dove-like tone while in office, extending the hand of friendship to a brutal dictatorship elected through ballot rigging and intimidation. Like President Obama, the secretary of state remained largely silent during the immediate aftermath of the Iranian elections and, in an effort to not offend the Iranian leadership, completely avoided referring to the reelection of Ahmadinejad as fraudulent. This was a cowardly approach, one that significantly undercut America's image as a great nation that will always stand up for the cause of liberty and freedom in the face of tyranny.

The Obama Administration has made a greater effort than any U.S. Administration in history to extend the hand of friendship to unsavory regimes. There is barely a tyranny on the face of the earth that has not been earmarked for “engagement,” from Tehran to Caracas to Khartoum. The Obama/Clinton doctrine is increasingly defined by a refusal on the part of the Administration to take an aggressive stand against despotism and by the relegation of human rights concerns to the bottom of the well of foreign policy issues.

Obama/Clinton Doctrine: Fraught with Peril. There are many dangers inherent in this strategy, including lending the veneer of respectability to dictatorships that crave international acceptance when none is merited. Such an approach will swiftly undermine the activities of opposition movements and non-governmental organizations operating in repressive societies—organizations that rely upon the isolation of their governments within the inter-

1. Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Relations,” Washington, D.C., July 15, 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm> (July 16, 2009).

national community to seek democratic reforms and political change.

This doctrine also buys valuable time for regimes such as Iran to advance their nuclear programs and erodes international pressure to strengthen sanctions. By adopting the European Union's policy of "constructive engagement" with Tehran, the United States has given Ahmadinejad a new lease on life, with the Iranian tyrant acting in an increasingly aggressive and assertive fashion, with the knowledge that the U.S. is now highly unlikely to use force against his nuclear facilities.

A Dazed and Confused Foreign Policy. Clinton's underwhelming performance so far as secretary of state is representative of a U.S. foreign policy that projects weakness rather than strength and is leaving the United States increasingly vulnerable in the face of an array of enemies. She has sorely disappointed those who argued that she would toughen the President's position on key international issues, especially the Iranian nuclear threat.

The brutal reality is that rather than strengthening Washington internationally, the much-hyped Obama/Clinton doctrine of "smart power" is an empty shell that masks a strategy for America's decline as a world power. The long-term strength and security of the United States depends ultimately upon strong defenses, including the launch of a global missile defense system as well as the advancement of economic and political freedom across the globe.

America's position as a superpower is being weakened by President Obama and Secretary Clinton's failure to stand up to tyranny, and their rash embrace of odious dictators will ultimately tarnish America's image. An Administration that chooses to appease evil rather than confront it will ultimately decline in credibility both at home and abroad, in turn leaving the homeland more vulnerable to attack.

Not a Popularity Contest. World leadership is not a popularity contest. Rather, it is about making tough decisions and adopting positions that will be met with hostility in many parts of the globe. It is about the assertive projection of American power, both to secure the United States and to protect the free world. Such leadership is often a lonely and unenviable task that at times will require the use of maximum force against America's enemies.

The United States needs stronger leadership on the world stage from both the White House and the State Department, including a tougher stance toward America's foes from a secretary of state whose voice is unusually meek and silent. This is a time for America to project its might and confront its adversaries—not to retreat behind a failed strategy of "engagement."

—Nile Gardiner Ph.D., is the Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at The Heritage Foundation. Erica Munkwitz assisted with research for this paper.