



Obama on a Roll?

Roger Svensson

In the last month, there has been a flurry of foreign and security policy activities from the Obama administration. These were a nuclear arms deal with Russia, a revised U.S. nuclear strategy, the withholding of a report condemning China as a currency manipulator which opened up the possibility of China letting its currency strengthen, and most recently a nuclear summit in Washington that started with the Ukraine promising to get rid of its enriched uranium. So much for potential successes; the Israeli–U.S. relations are in dire straits. Iran is a ticking time bomb. The Afghan President might be a problem on par with the Taliban in the process of state (if not nation) building that has to parallel the military effort by the U.S. led forces.

In a previous policy brief on President Barack Obama's foreign policy (*ISDP Policy Brief No. 21, March 10, 2010*) my assessment was that one should not expect foreign policy to play a major role in the upcoming midterm elections. The economy and the job market, Wall Street versus Main Street, and other pressing domestic issues are likely to dominate. A frustrated populace might very well deal the Democratic Party a severe blow even if it is highly unlikely that they will lose their majorities, but very likely their filibuster proof supermajority in the Senate.

On a high with health reform passed by Congress (but in ways that have enraged not only the Republican Party), President Obama's top domestic priority is financial regulation (where there is a fighting chance that there will be a few Republicans in the Senate that will support stricter control). In parallel, he has embarked upon what could be described as a foreign policy offensive. However, this is not likely to change the political discourse in the run up to the November elections. The domestic issues will be the dominant themes and the critique, especially from the conservative – Tea Party – fringe, will be vociferous. But there are a few exceptions.

A Change in the U.S.-Russia Dialogue?

The most concrete result so far in President Barack Obama's foreign policy is the signing of a new nuclear arms agreement in Prague in early April. The new ten year deal succeeds the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that was signed in 1991 and expired by the end of last year.

Even if the new agreement will lower strategic warheads by 25 percent and launchers by double that, the two nuclear superpowers will still be able to annihilate each other several times over. A thorny issue in the year long negotiations was, of course, the U.S. plans for missile defence in Europe. Thorny not only in the negotiations but also in U.S. domestic policy where Republicans have clearly stated that ratification of the treaty will not be possible if it is linked to missile defence. The Obama administration's interpretation of the treaty is that missile defence and offensive weapons are related, but that there is nothing formally binding.

The nuclear arms deal is, of course, important for strategic security reasons. But more important is the possibility that it signals a new tone in the relationship between the United States and Russia. The presentation of a reset button, almost a year ago to date, by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was a rather embarrassing event when she met the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. However, just the other week, when Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited the United States and spoke at the Brookings Institution, he clearly stated that there is a change in the atmosphere of Russian–U.S. relations. The two major powers clearly need each others support on a number of problems, ranging from the question of Russia being allowed to enter the World Trade Organization, to taking a strong stand on Iran's nuclear ambitions or the U.S. Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan.

It seems, at least for the time being, that a more conciliatory Russian discourse has replaced the strident verbiage of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.



With China as Well?

If foreign policy, in general, at the moment does not play a leading role in U.S. domestic policy, relations with China certainly does. Even if arguments over the Dalai Lama's meeting with the President, or the arms sales to Taiwan bubble up at regular intervals, the real issues are economic and especially the fact that Congress sees China as a currency manipulator and therefore unfairly supporting its own export industry. A substantial number of U.S. House members want tariffs on Chinese goods, like the tariffs on Chinese tires imposed in September last year.

The White House is treading very carefully in an effort to handle the matter diplomatically. The view is that putting too much pressure on China would most likely not solve anything but rather cater to nationalistic feelings in China. With this in mind, Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner decided to delay a report in which China might have been officially declared a currency manipulator.

The U.S. President raised the problem when he met Hu Jintao during the Chinese President's visit to the nuclear summit in Washington. They also discussed sanctions against Iran and the need to put pressure on North Korea. It would seem that the discussions were constructive and that the Chinese President was accommodating. The word is out that China will allow the renminbi to become slightly stronger. Furthermore, Obama promised to help China if they supported stronger sanctions on Iran. Currently, China imports more than ten percent of its oil from Iran and would need to substitute Iranian oil if that supply was cut off as a result of China joining a sanctions regime.

It would of course be premature to think that China will actually follow the United States in a campaign of "targeted sanctions." But it is important to note that the strained relations that have characterised U.S.–China relations for the better part of Obama's presidency seem to have abated.

With Such Friends...

In early March, Vice President Joe Biden went to Israel in an effort to restart the Middle East peace talks. At the outset, he said that there was a "moment of real opportunity." The next day he was embarrassed and furious over the Israeli declaration that the building of settlements in East Jerusalem would continue. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in

an almost hour long phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, called it a deeply negative signal, not only for the peace process but also for Israeli relations with the United States.

A couple of weeks later Prime Minister Netanyahu visited the White House for two hours in what has been described as a very chilly conversation, really leading nowhere. The day before the Israeli Prime Minister had rejected Washington's plea to halt building in Eastern Jerusalem. Later on, President Obama, in a news conference, followed the statement by General David H. Petraeus in declaring that the Middle East situation was "a vital national security interest of the United States."

It is difficult to find another recent instance when U.S.–Israeli relations were as sour as they are at present. There is speculation in Washington that the President will present his own peace plan. The Jewish lobby in the U.S. is seriously worried that there might be a substantial shift in the U.S. position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The Republican Party – or at least the conservative activists – is highly critical, which was indicated by Liz Cheney, daughter of the former Vice President. The treatment of Prime Minister Netanyahu was "disgraceful" and the President's foreign policy was to "apologize for America, abandon our allies and appease our enemies."

Another sign of distress in the relations was the fact that Prime Minister Netanyahu pointedly stayed away from the nuclear summit in Washington.

This criticism also included the President's unannounced visit to Kabul and his conversation with President Hamid Karzai. It was the first visit by the U.S. President who, besides the ritual meeting with U.S. troops, had a very sombre message for the Afghan leader. The military efforts would not succeed if Karzai does not step up to the plate and seriously tackle corruption and bad governance. Karzai, on his part has criticised "Western interference" and the role of Western Embassies in the presidential elections. At a press briefing, the White House spokesman apparently refused to call Karzai an ally and hinted at cancelling an upcoming meeting between Obama and Karzai.

The mutual irritation is obvious and, as with Israel, President Obama is willing to be highly critical of foreign leaders who are supposed to be working with the U.S., not against them.



An Obama Foreign Policy Style?

David Ignatius, the seasoned columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote a rather funny piece a few weeks ago. He describes it as the White House “hitting [the] bureaucratic cruising speed” with policies moving through “a well-managed National Security Council.” If this is a true picture, present day foreign policy making is a far cry from the “gut feeling” decision making of former President George W. Bush. Or the internecine fighting between Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeldt with Vice President Dick Cheney mostly playing his own game.

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