

## **Obama's Foreign Policy week**

*\*By Maria L. Fornella*

Satisfied with some important progress being made in health care reform on the home front, these past few days President Obama turned his full attention to foreign policy. In a week packed with international speeches, bilateral meetings and joint declarations, he succeeded in establishing a new ambitious agenda for international cooperation and wasted no time in getting started.

In his speech to the UN, he outlined his main foreign policy goals based on four pillars: non-proliferation, climate change, Middle East peace and economic stability. He spoke clearly about his determination to put an end to the international skepticism and distrust the United States faced during the Bush years and enumerated the changes already made: banning the use of torture, closing the Guantánamo base, drawing down forces in Iraq, renewing efforts in the Arab-Israeli conflict by naming a special envoy, seriously addressing climate change and abandoning plans for a land-based missile defense in Eastern Europe. He challenged other leaders to respond in kind by joining US efforts at non-proliferation, fighting terrorism, taking measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combating poverty.

A day later in Pittsburgh for the G-20 summit, the President, flanked by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Sarkozy, revealed a new nuclear facility built by Iran in the city of Qum and called for further sanctions on the Islamic Republic. This well-timed revelation is supposed to give the administration some more leverage when talks with the Iranians start later this week. As it happens, the US had known about this new uranium enriching plant for more than a year but had kept the information secret for later use. In Pittsburgh, with France and Britain safely on his side, the President had further opportunity to press the other two members of the UN Security Council, Russia and China, to cooperate with the new sanctions regime that will most likely include imports of refined oil into Iran. While Russia appears to be leaning towards cooperation (perhaps as a quid pro quo of Obama's decision not to deploy the anti-missile defense system in Poland and Czech Republic), it is not as yet clear whether the Chinese will too. This week has been a good one for China, which seems to be coming of age as an international player both in climate change and as a partner for economic stability in the G-20. But the revelation at Qum was certainly a pre-emptive coup that put the Iranians on the defensive, and gave Obama an opportunity to publicly test the other Permanent Members of the Security Council to prove their commitment to non-proliferation.

As the United States moves aggressively to engage with the rest of the world and vows to renew its pledge to international law and institutions, the expectation is that others will take their share of responsibility and respond to global

challenges. Obama's moral authority flows not only from what he says, and how he says it, but also by virtue of who he is: in his case, the man is the message and the intended drastic cut with his predecessor could not be more apparent.

However, as Realists constantly remind us, foreign policy is about national interest defined as power, and while the change of tone and of emissary is well-noted, we are likely to see some change, but also a lot of continuity in US foreign policy.

Barack Obama's first speech at the United Nations General Assembly was well-received around the world but had less impact on a home audience whose main concerns are unemployment, health care reform and economic recovery.

Inevitably, the usual suspects accused him of treason for recognizing America's past mistakes in public and for socializing with tyrants. Others denounced his narcissistic impulses, for trying to portray American foreign policy as "all about Obama". While it is easy to dismiss the extreme critics, it is important for the

rest of the world to realize how much the United Nations' legitimacy and prestige has suffered in the United States during the last ten years, and not only due to derisions by Bolton and Bush. TV images of the UN headquarters in New York seem distant and irrelevant to most Americans, who view the organization as an anachronistic shibboleth that embodies all fluff and no substance and whose activities are hard to take seriously in most cases, be it when it deals with

Rwanda, Darfur or with Iranian sanctions. At this year's opening session, the General Assembly room, with a badly lit podium and a very unbecoming blue-greenish background, was showing its age in spite of a 2002 facelift (it was built in 1952). And while Obama was as dynamic and articulate as usual, his televised speech was followed by that of Mohammad Khadafy from Libya, which lasted one hour and a half and included bizarre statements and phrases that can only be accounted for by a serious onset of senility.

Besides calling for a UN investigation of John F. Kennedy's assassination, and surreally complaining about how far most of those present had had to travel to get to New York (was jetlag his excuse to explain away his own state of mental confusion?), he repeatedly called President Obama "my son" (I cringed at imagining the right wing blogs reaction to that) and referred to the UN Security Council as the "Terror Council". His difficulty to find a place in New York where he would be allowed to pitch his tent was followed with amusement by the media and further added to his own oddity, and by extension, to the inadequacy of the UN as a serious forum. While later Prime Minister Netanyahu's excellent, Churchill-like speech brought the audience back to the 21st century and restored some respectability to the venue, the UN lost credibility again when Iranian president Ahmadinejad went on a new rant later in the day and again and proceeded once more to deny the Holocaust's existence. In addition to this rarified atmosphere, the main foreign policy topic that is of concern for the American public, and the one that would have made them pay attention, namely, the war in Afghanistan was hardly mentioned by Obama in this occasion.

After eight years of war in Afghanistan, the effort seems to be unraveling on all fronts. European NATO members, whose soldiers are fighting and dying in Afghanistan, are unwilling or unable to commit more troops; the Taliban has renewed its offensives with new intensity in the south and the east of the

country, and the Afghan election was plagued with corruption, proving what many already suspected, that President Hamid Karzai is an extremely unreliable partner and a corrupt leader who will not be able to hold the country together. At the same time, Al Qaeda has found refuge in neighboring Pakistan so the US initial counterterrorist mission, namely to hunt down and exterminate Al Qaeda, has mutated into one of counterinsurgency against an indigenous group, the Taliban, fighting against the government and the foreign forces to regain its power. All this in a country that has never been a nation, a narco-state whose economic base is the production and trafficking of opium, and where several empires, from the Macedonians to the British and the Soviets were once defeated. The President's plan so far has been to train the Afghan army so that it can hold off the Taliban, support government institutions, gain the trust of villagers and create structures of governance in rural areas so that Al Qaeda won't be able to move in again.

This week a Pentagon memo by General Crystal was leaked by Bob Woodward of Watergate fame. Published in the Washington Post on September 21st, it presents a grim picture of the war and warns that success is uncertain. It calls for new resources and a new counterinsurgency campaign. While the number of troops requested is not specified, it warns that "under-resourcing" the effort could be fatal. Woodward, never one to sell himself short, has called his leaked memo the equivalent of the 1971 Pentagon Papers leaked by Daniel Ellsberg in the New York Times, which revealed the expansion of the Vietnam War from 1965 on, that had been kept secret from the American public. Of course the memo is not the equivalent of Ellsberg and Russo's revelations, but still, it refocused attention on the intractability of this war. The President's response has been that after the Afghan election, the White House is re-assessing its strategy and that until he is satisfied with a new strategy he will not send more troops. It is clear that the administration is having doubts about a conflict it once called a war of necessity. Public opinion is also turning against what will soon be the longest war in American history, as casualties continue to increase and there is no end in sight.

As the term "military surge" is being increasingly used to denote McCrystal's new demands, comparisons with the war in Iraq are inevitable. Similarly to the Iraq war, elections have represented a turning point. But the surge in Iraq began with the so-called Sunni awakening, when the Iraqis themselves decided they had had enough of the violence and organized against those that insisted on it (mainly outsiders, Al Qaeda-in-Iraq). Also, in Iraq's leader Al-Maliki, the US found a relatively reliable and legitimate partner, one who instigated the political class to resolve their differences by political means. Finally, Iraq had an economic base that could be restored to produce substantial national wealth, and a mostly urban, well-educated population with some institutional experience. In contrast, Afghanistan is a mainly rural country, a tribal society which repudiates any attempts at centralization and profoundly distrusts the government in Kabul more, in some cases, than the foreign troops. The central government is rotten and weak, Karzai an unreliable leader who stole the election and whose brother is the head of the drug mafia. Can more US troops make up for all these weaknesses?

Obama is thus in a delicate situation: he can't be "at war" with his own generals

(indeed, General McCrystal was appointed by Obama only in March, after he dismissed the previous general in charge). On the other hand, if he allows more troops to be deployed, there is danger that Afghanistan may become his Vietnam. He therefore needs to choose between continuing a counterinsurgency operation, training more Afghan forces, protecting the local populations, getting into their villages and gaining their trust, or withdrawing ground troops and focusing on counter-terrorism, using drones and other off-shore means and special forces to go after the terrorist bases. Vice-President Biden is advocating a middle ground strategy: leaving enough troops on the ground to prevent Al Qaeda from returning to Afghanistan, but redefining the mission as one of narrow counter-terrorism and move away from nation-building and a protracted counter-insurgency operation that would signify more US casualties and more discontent at home. After all, the main reason why the US went to Afghanistan was to confront and eliminate Al Qaeda, which has since then moved across the border to the tribal areas of Pakistan. As several domestic arrests have demonstrated this week, Al Qaeda threats are just as likely to come from Springfield Illinois, Queens New York or Dallas Texas as from abroad or from the virtual Al Qaeda organizing through the worldwide web. Recalibrating his approach to Afghanistan is thus imperative, and it must be done for the right reasons, regardless of personal gain or saving face.

Obama has had a very successful September, but his ambitious agenda both at home and abroad faces many pitfalls ahead. A youthful president, brimming with self-confidence, with a huge electoral mandate and with the best team of experts in history, can still be thwarted by unsolvable problems, domestic and foreign enemies and by serendipity itself. As a student of history and a John F Kennedy admirer, Obama knows this, and he should measure his decisions and temper his ambitions accordingly.

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