

The quantity theory of foreign policy

Russia's hint at sanctions on Iran looks like a win for Barack Obama. Elsewhere, problems are piling up.



AFP

At the start of his presidency Barack Obama squared up to the issues of the day with breathtaking vigour. In America he set about rescuing the economy and reforming health care. Abroad, he charged into areas where George Bush had become bogged down—peace in the Middle East, relations with Russia, climate change, Iran's nuclear programme and war in Afghanistan. This eagerness to transform everything at once was not just youthful ambition. After the sullen, uncompromising finish to the Bush years, Mr Obama's logic seemed to be that a big agenda combined with softer, more engaging diplomacy could work in his favour. With each success, he stood to gather enough momentum to attack the next obstacle.

Eight months on, this quantity theory of foreign policy faces a test. In short order, starting on September 22nd, Mr Obama chaired talks between the president of the Palestinian authority and the Israeli prime minister; he set out his climate-change agenda at the United Nations (see article); he was to chair a security-council session on the spread of nuclear weapons; and then head to Pittsburgh for a G20 meeting on finance and the world economy. Last week he reversed a Bush-era decision, when he chose a missile-defence system against Iranian weapons initially based at sea rather than on land; and next week America will seek to persuade Iran to forswear any military nuclear programme. The hope is that America's president emerges from this diplomatic decathlon able to show that his approach is working. The fear is that Mr Obama will find himself as frustrated as his predecessor was.

The velocity of diplomacy

Optimists can chalk up one victory, at least. On Wednesday Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev, said that he is more open to sanctions against Iran. Although both sides denied it, this looks very much like a reward for Mr Obama's shift on missile defence—Russia loathed the Bush plan (see article). Elsewhere too Mr Obama has made gains. In three speeches in Prague, Cairo and Accra earlier this year, he used the full power of his rhetoric to win people over. Each time he portrayed America as a respectful senior partner rather than a domineering chief executive; he asked nations to take responsibility for their own destiny, and they loved it. He worked with China to get new sanctions on rogue North Korea. And he showed his mettle by asking Israel to stop building settlements on occupied land—in effect, a down-payment to get peace talks started.

Mr Obama can still stir the heart: witness his address to the UN on Wednesday. But on the hardest issues he is bumping up against some harsh realities. Rattled by Mr Obama's

demands, Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has now slowed the push for peace right down (see article). America, for all its talk, had little to offer the world on climate change this week: domestic legislation is stuck in the Senate and will struggle to pass unless Mr Obama gets behind it. Even Mr Medvedev's words on sanctions may be hard to turn into deeds, if only because China opposes them and Vladimir Putin, who still holds the cards in Moscow, has sounded less keen.

Most gravely of all, Mr Obama is vacillating over Afghanistan, which has the power to break his presidency. He has called it a war of necessity, but voters are turning against the campaign. General Stanley McChrystal, the commanding officer, has made a strong case for more resources, both to fight the Taliban and to convince Afghans that the outside world will stay the course. Mr Obama says he needs to see a strategy before adding to the 21,000 extra troops he has already sent to the country, but that looks like a device to reassure American voters at a time when his domestic policies are in trouble. It sends an alarming message to wavering Europeans itching to pull out and to Afghans wondering whether to throw their lot in with the government or with the insurgents. If Mr Obama really does believe he must prevail in Afghanistan, then public doubts and delay will only make the task harder.

These foreign-policy setbacks carry potent risks for Mr Obama at home. The time-honoured way for a Republican opposition to undermine a Democratic president is to depict him as profligate with the nation's treasure and careless of its security. The president needs to keep his momentum or he could find his own logic working against him. Failure and impotence in one area risk undermining his ambitions in the next. If Mr Obama is to avoid that fate, the world must be convinced that behind his ability to inspire lies a steely resolve.

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