

The quiet American

Is Barack Obama's diplomacy subtle and strategic, or weak and naive? The world is about to find out.

At last Barack Obama seems to be starting to make up his mind. After months of agonising, he is apparently close to announcing that he will after all send a decent number of American reinforcements to Afghanistan (see article). Meanwhile, having barely mentioned climate change since his inauguration, he has now told the world that he is going to the international summit in Copenhagen—and with a provisional promise that the world's greatest polluter will cut emissions.

Bold stuff. But both Afghanistan and Copenhagen can also be cited as evidence of a weakness that runs through his foreign policy. It looks to many as if he has dithered, not deliberated. On Afghanistan, far from being clever, his faint-hearted attempt to talk round Congress, manage his squabbling officials and twist the arm of Hamid Karzai, the vote-rigging Afghan president, has arguably accomplished little except hand the initiative to the enemy: his generals have an uphill struggle. On climate change, the rush to Copenhagen, with no bill in sight in Congress, has an air of desperation.

This goes to the heart of the debate about Mr Obama's diplomacy. Which will he be, clever or weak? Does this president have a strategy, backed if necessary by force, to reorder the world? Or is he merely a presidential version of Alden Pyle, Graham Greene's idealistic, clever Quiet American who wants to change the world, but underestimates how bad the world is—and ends up causing harm?

Short-sighters v long-gamers

The doubters argue that, however decent and articulate, Mr Obama is gaining a reputation as someone who can be pushed around. This month, after the president pandered to China by refusing to meet the Dalai Lama, China pushed for more by banning questions at his Beijing press conference with Hu Jintao, its president. When Mr Obama demanded that Israel stop all work on its settlements in the occupied territories, Binyamin Netanyahu, its prime minister, defied him and still, staggeringly, won praise from Hillary Clinton.

Each time, the doubters say, Mr Obama's delicate overtures are met with ambiguity or contempt. Since he engaged Iran, it has continued to temporise and dissimulate over its nuclear programme. When Mr Obama abandoned a missile-defence system in Europe, he appeared to extract a pledge from Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev, that his country would support sanctions if Iran is recalcitrant—only for Vladimir Putin, the prime minister, repeatedly to say he sees no need. Although America has pledged \$7.5 billion in aid to Pakistan over five years, the army seems reluctant to take on the Taliban who drift from northern Pakistan into Afghanistan—indeed, the conditions riding on the grant were spun by the Pakistani security services into an American "insult" (see article). Yes, Mr Karzai eventually buckled in Kabul, but his readiness to thumb his nose at the world superpower was humiliating.

The "clever" camp retort that diplomacy is not about instant gratification. Mr Obama has pulled off the urgent tasks of starting to withdraw troops from Iraq and resetting America's dysfunctional relations with Russia. He has boosted the G20 as a new global forum. This week Israel announced a partial settlement freeze. With health-care reform under his belt, he will soon be able to turn to world affairs with his status enhanced. Besides, you could hardly accuse Mr Obama of timidity. In three speeches in Prague, Cairo and Accra, he set out a new foreign policy that rejects the Manichean view of his predecessor. He means to negotiate deep

cuts in nuclear weapons, make peace between Arabs and Jews, engage Iran, heal the climate and establish America as the strongest and most upright pole of a multipolar world. Yes, this work lies ahead, but how much can you ask in a year of war and recession?

It is a fair point, but as the months drag on, the “weak” case has been gaining the upper hand. Mr Obama has yet to show he has the staying power to take on a dangerous, stubborn and occasionally bad world. Even allowing for Israel’s shift this week, the president has hardly lived up to his promise to work for Middle East peace “with all the patience and dedication that the task requires”. With one big exception, he has not yet shown that he can back his oratory with a stick—and that was a tariff on Chinese tyres, a weak sop to America’s unions.

Calm and conciliatory pragmatism is welcome after George Bush’s impetuous moral certitude, but it also carries risks. Critics on the American right are wrong to carp at Mr Obama’s bowing to kings and emperors. Simple courtesy will help restore America’s image, not diminish it. The trouble is that the president often seems kinder to America’s rivals than to its friends. His guest this week, Manmohan Singh, India’s prime minister, may well have moaned about Mr Obama’s kid-glove handling of China. Allies in eastern Europe, their soldiers dying in Afghanistan, resent being called mere “partners”, Mr Obama’s term for pretty much anyone (see article). The hapless Gordon Brown has got precious little thanks.

And how exactly will Mr Obama’s quiet multilateral vision, in which each nation does its bit for the good of all, work in practice? He is right that American power is circumscribed. But the European Union is not fit to help him police the world (see article). China, India and Russia are not willing.

“God save us always from the innocent and the good”

That leaves Mr Obama with a burden to shoulder on his own. In the coming weeks he could prove the doubters wrong. He could lead the way towards a brave deal on the climate. He could press Iran to negotiate over its nuclear programme before his own end-of-year deadline—or secure Russian backing for sanctions. He could agree to cut nuclear arms with Russia. He could bully the Palestinians and Mr Netanyahu to agree to talk. And he could get Mr Karzai and Pakistan to show that they mean to make Afghanistan governable. Even part of that list would set up Mr Obama as a foreign-policy president. But if there is no progress, then Mr Obama will be cast as starry-eyed and weak. He himself recognised the danger of that in one of those golden speeches: “Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something.”

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