

## The price of detachment

*By shunning foreign entanglements, does Barack Obama risk losing his global bully pulpit?*



IF AMERICA grows unwilling to carry a big stick, will speaking softly work? The question remains somewhat theoretical. Even in its post-Iraq, sequester-pinched state America's armed forces have no global rivals. But tests may come, and soon.

Under Barack Obama, American foreign policy has become ever warier of security entanglements with foes and friends alike. Mr Obama does not just want to save resources for nation-building back home (though that is certainly part of it). Officials and diplomats say he also wants other powers to step up and take on more responsibilities, rather than assume that America will always be the security guarantor of last resort.

Yet Mr Obama's caution co-exists with an abundant willingness to advise others about their own best interests. That is a tricky combination to pull off. Get it wrong, and America risks being seen as unwilling to play global policeman, while still being happy to play global scold.

To be fair, when Mr Obama finds himself nagging foreigners to be more sensible, he is often acting at the urging of alarmed neighbours or allies. Indeed, nagging foreigners has been part of an American president's job description for a century or more. What is new is that the nagging is now being done by a post-cold war, globalisation-buffed ex-hyperpower whose president believes that American intervention often causes as many problems as it solves. Alas for Mr Obama, a dilemma looms: in foreign affairs the ability to scold effectively requires some underpinning by a willingness to engage.

Take the Middle East, scene of the first overseas trip of Mr Obama's second term, due to take in Israel, the Palestinian-controlled West Bank and Jordan from March 20th to 23rd. Officials could scarcely have done more to lower expectations for the journey, Mr Obama's first to Israel since becoming president. Expect no grand plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, Mr Obama told American-Jewish leaders before his departure. A White House spokesman, pondering planned meetings with regional leaders, predicted discussions about how America might "affect the trajectory" of political movements sweeping the Arab world, while leaving final outcomes for locals to determine. Pressed on the bloodletting in Syria, the White House talked of funds for refugees and fell back on assurances that America has a strong stake in seeing that the violence "is ended".

For all their caution, Obama aides could not conceal one big ambition for the trip: to use the president's powers of persuasion to mend frayed ties of trust with the Israeli public. That means convincing ordinary Israelis that Mr Obama will do what it takes to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon—and that this guarantee transcends otherwise dreadful relations with Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu. American officials also stressed the importance of a speech to Israeli students scheduled for March 21st, described as a chance to speak directly to the Israeli public and ask them to consider what true security for their country might mean. That sounded like an appeal to consider whether Israel's future is really served by politicians promoting an unyielding line on coexistence with the Palestinians.

To some in Mr Obama's administration, Israel is a prime example of a country which mistakes its own interests, in part because it takes for granted American support. But seen from Washington, other alarming examples abound. To list just some, officials talk of urging the Palestinian Authority to see that its interests lie in the unpromising slog of talks with Israel, and not in a tempting rupture with the status quo, for instance by trying to haul Israel before the International Criminal Court. America's strategy of nuclear diplomacy with Iran, backed by sanctions, rests on convincing ayatollahs that, in dreaming of a sprint to a bomb, they are misjudging their national interest. In Syria, even as Mr Obama resists calls for American intervention, his envoys have worked hard to persuade the Russians that they are hurting themselves in sticking by the Assad regime.

In Asia, America's relations with Pakistan and with the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai are one long argument about overlapping interests, differently perceived. Further east Mr Obama's envoys have told Chinese leaders that if they dislike America's more robust presence in their back yard, then China's self-interest lies in reining in North Korea, avoiding territorial rows that alarm neighbours, and generally signing up to great-power rules and norms. At the Lilliputian end of the scale, American envoys nag European governments, for their own sakes, to fix their union (and nag Britain to resist the urge to leave it).

### **Drone strikes don't count as carrying a big stick**

Is all this nagging sustainable, especially if Mr Obama's critics are right that he is somehow embarrassed by American leadership, and so is deliberately leaving a "vacuum" that lets foes flourish?

The vacuum-avoidance theory of leadership, beloved of Republican hawks in Congress, is too crude. Not every problem is solved by America noisily taking charge. A sharper critique, as advanced in a new national-security strategy from the Project for a United and Strong America, a bipartisan group of ex-envoys and senior officials, compares the emerging world order to a fiercely competitive marketplace, in which America must invest, via engagement, to defend the open, rules-based international order vital to American interests.

Speaking softly suits Mr Obama. His desire to see other powers stop free-riding on American security guarantees is understandable. In a world of shifting power balances, it is sensible to appeal to the self-interests of others, especially after the overreach of the Bush era. But he is taking a risk. Step back too far from big sticks, and when America speaks, it may not be heard.

**Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 406, n. 8828, p. 37, 23 a 29 Mar. 2013.**