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America's New Foreign Policy

The change has been announced, but it is one only of tactics

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US Vice-President Joe Biden unveiled America's new foreign policy at the 45th Munich Security Conference this weekend. Events preceding the conference underscored the challenging atmosphere the US faces in the world today.

Just a few days earlier, Iran launched its first homemade satellite into space, advertising the rapid development of its rocket/ballistic capabilities. Iran, a state that has now emerged as America's principle international rival, is celebrating the 30th anniversary of its Islamic revolution: a revolution that 30 years ago ended US imperial control of Iran's politics and more recently is pushing to end US hegemony in the Middle East. For 30 years the US has imposed sanctions against Iran and threatened it with war, working diligently to overthrow its regime, without much success. Iran is a reminder of the continued failure of US foreign policy.

Also just before the Munich Security Conference, Kyrgyzstan announced that it will be closing a vital US air force base in Manas, reportedly under pressure from Russia. Russia lately has begun rolling back growing US influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia -- regions that Russia considers part of its sphere of influence.

Thus Biden went to Munich to convince Europe that America has changed.

For the past eight years, Europe had watched impotently as the US under George W Bush abandoned the American tradition of consulting and working in consort with Europe. Many

European leaders came to hate Bush and America not just because of American unilateralism and arrogance, but also because America had so strikingly exposed the inability of Europe to moderate or restrain US foreign policy.

George W Bush reminded Europe of the extent to which it was dependent on the US for its global pre-eminence, and how without American support European states were incapable of making a difference on the global stage. Now they were hoping that a weakened America would once again return to them, seeking help and in the process restoring their own influence.

Vice-President Biden did just that. He said: "The threats we face have no respect for borders. No single country, no matter how powerful, can best meet them alone. We believe that international alliances and organizations do not diminish America's power -- they help us advance our collective security, economic interests and values. So we will engage. We will listen. We will consult. America needs the world, just as I believe the world needs America."

Biden's speech had much for those who sought more humility from the superpower. He promised that America would not abandon its values, that it would not torture and it would work to restore the transatlantic alliance.

Making up with Europe and Russia were not the only items on Biden's agenda. He reiterated President Obama's assertion that America would "extend a hand to those who unclench their fist".

All of this sounds great and I applaud the Obama administration for convincing the world that things are about to change. But I hope it recognizes the danger it is placing itself in. In a few months from now, words alone will not be enough; America will be judged by its actions not by its promises. Indeed, these ambitious promises of change will make the judgment even harsher.

So far America has demanded that Russia, Iran, the Taliban, Hamas and Hizbullah -- the primary sources of resistance to American interests overseas -- surrender to US demands. These demands remain the same. The only difference is that while the Bush administration threatened and used force, Obama has promised to use more diplomacy.

But why will they submit to Obama given that they did not do the same to a more threatening America when it was definitely more powerful than it is now? Moreover, if these players perceive current American predicaments as a direct result of their collective defiance, they are likely to stand their ground more firmly now than they did before.

The promise to listen implies empathy. How does the Obama administration seek to extend empathy to its principle challengers? Forget the rivals; is it ready to listen to its allies? Will it listen to NATO ally Turkey on the Arab-Israeli issue?

There is something important missing from Obama's new strategy, a realization that perhaps it needs to revisit the goals of US foreign policy vis-à-vis its nemeses, not just its tactics.