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The American century is so over

By Dilip Hiro
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Irrespective of their politics, flawed leaders share a common trait. They generally remain remarkably oblivious to the harm they do to the nation they lead. George W Bush is a salient recent example, as is former British prime minister Tony Blair. When it comes to foreign policy, we are now witnessing a similar phenomenon at the Barack Obama White House.

Here is the Obama pattern. Choose a foreign leader to pressure. Threaten him with dire consequences if he does not bend to Washington's will. When he refuses to submit and instead responds vigorously, back off quickly and overcompensate for failure by switching into a placatory mode.

In his first year-plus in office, Obama has provided us with enough examples to summarize his leadership style. The United States president fails to evaluate objectively the strength of the cards that a targeted leader holds and his resolve to play them.

Obama's propensity to retreat at the first sign of resistance shows that he lacks both guts and the strong convictions that are essential elements distinguishing statesmen from politicians. By pursuing a rudderless course in his foreign policy, by flip-flopping in his approach to other leaders, he is also inadvertently furnishing hard evidence to those who argue that American power is on the decline - and that the downward slide of the globe's former "sole superpower" is irreversible.

Those who have refused to buckle under Obama's initial threats and hardball tactics (and

so the impact of American power) include not just the presidents of China, a first-tier mega-nation, and Brazil, a rising major power, but also the leaders of Israel, a regional power heavily dependent on Washington for its sustenance, and Afghanistan, a client state - not to mention the military junta of Honduras, a minor entity, which stood up to the Obama administration as if it were the politburo of the former Soviet Union.

Flip-flop on Honduras

By overthrowing the civilian government of President Manuel Zelaya in June 2009, the Honduran generals acquired the odious distinction of carrying out the first military coup in Central America in the post-Cold War era. What drove them to it? The precipitating factor was Zelaya's decision to have a non-binding survey on holding a referendum that November about convening a constituent assembly to redraft the constitution.

Denouncing the coup as a "terrible precedent" for the region and demanding its reversal, Obama initially insisted: "We do not want to go back to a dark past. We always want to stand with democracy."

Those words should have been followed by deeds like recalling his ambassador in Tegucigalpa (just as Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela did) and an immediate suspension of the American aid on which the country depends. Instead, what followed was a statement by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that the administration would not formally designate the ouster as a military coup "for now" - even though the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the European Union had already done so.

This backtracking encouraged the Honduran generals and their Republican supporters in the US Congress. They began to stonewall, while a top-notch public relations firm in Washington, hired by the de facto government of the military's puppet president, Roberto Micheletti, went to work.

These moves proved enough to weaken the "democratic" resolve of a president who makes lofty speeches but lacks strong convictions when it comes to foreign policy. Clinton then began talking of reconciling the ousted president and the Micheletti government, treating the legitimate and illegitimate camps as equals.

Having realized that a hard line stance vis-a-vis Washington was paying dividends, the Honduran generals remained unbending. Only when Clinton insisted that the State Department would not recognize the November presidential [election result](#) because of doubts about it being free, fair, and transparent did they agree to a compromise a month before the poll. They would let Zelaya return to the presidential palace to finish his term in office.

That was when right-wing Republican Senator Jim DeMint, a fanatical supporter of the Honduran generals, swung into action. He would give Republican consent to White House nominees for important posts in Latin America only if Clinton agreed to recognize the [election](#) results, irrespective of what happened to Zelaya. Clinton buckled.

As a result, Obama became one of only two leaders - the other being Panama's president - in the 34-member Organization of American States to lend his support to the Honduran presidential poll. What probably appeared as a routine trade-off in domestic politics on Capitol Hill was seen by the international community as a humiliating retreat by Obama when challenged by a group of Honduran generals. Other leaders undoubtedly took note.

A far more dramatic reversal awaited Obama when he locked horns with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Wily Netanyahu trumps naive Obama

On taking office, the Obama White House announced with much fanfare that it would take on the intractable Israeli-Palestinian dispute right away. On examining the 2003 "road [map](#)" to peace backed by the United Nations, the United States, Russia, and the European Union, it discovered Israel's promise to cease all settlement-building activity.

In his first meeting with Netanyahu in mid-May 2009, Obama demanded a halt to the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem, already housing nearly 500,000 Jews. He argued that they were a major obstacle to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Netanyahu balked - and changed tack by stressing the existential threat that Iran's nuclear program posed to Israel.

Obama slipped into the Israeli leader's trap. At their joint press conference, he linked the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks with the Iranian nuclear threat. Then, to Netanyahu's delight, he gave Tehran "until the end of the year" to respond to his diplomatic overtures. In this way, the wily prime minister got the American president to accept his linkage of two unrelated issues while offering nothing in return.

Later, Netanyahu would differentiate between the ongoing expansion of present Jewish settlements and the creation of new ones, with no compromise on the former. He would also draw a clear distinction between the West Bank and East Jerusalem which, he would insist, was an integral part of the "indivisible, eternal capital of Israel", and therefore exempt from any restrictions on Jewish settlements.

Reflecting the Obama administration's style, Clinton offered a strong verbal riposte: "No exceptions to Israeli settlement freeze." These would prove empty words that changed nothing on the ground.

When Netanyahu publicly rejected Obama's demand for a halt to settlement construction in the West Bank, Obama raised the stakes, suggesting that Israeli intransigence endangered American security.

On October 15, after much back-channel communication between the two governments, Netanyahu announced that he had terminated the settlements talks with Washington.

Having said this, he offered to curb some settlement construction during a later meeting with Clinton. This won him the secretary of state's effusive praise for an "unprecedented" gesture, and a call for the unconditional resumption of the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

The Palestinians were flabbergasted by this American volte-face. "I believe that the US condones continued settlement expansion," said stunned Palestinian government spokesman Ghassan Khatib. "Negotiations are about ending the occupation, and settlement expansion is about entrenching the occupation."

In December, Netanyahu agreed to a 10-month moratorium on settlement building, but only after his government had given permission for the construction of 3,000 new apartments in the occupied West Bank. Sticking to their original position, the Palestinians refused to revive peace talks until there was a total freeze on settlement activity.

On March 9, 2010, just as [Vice-President](#) Joe Biden arrived in Jerusalem as part of Washington's campaign to kick-start the peace process, the Israeli authorities announced the approval of yet more building - 1,600 new homes in East Jerusalem. This audacious move, meant to underline Israel's defiance of Washington, left Biden - as well as Obama - fuming.

With the House of Representatives adopting his health reform bill on March 24, Obama was on a domestic roll when he met Netanyahu in Washington the next day. He reportedly laid out three conditions for defusing the crisis: an extension of the freeze on Jewish settlement expansion beyond September 2010; an end to further Jewish settlement projects in East Jerusalem; and withdrawal of the Israeli forces to the positions held before the second intifada in September 2000. He then left Netanyahu at the White House to consult with his advisers and get back to him if "there is anything new". Again, however, as with the Honduran generals, Obama's tough talk remained just that: talk.

The purpose of all this activity was to get the Palestinians to resume peace negotiations with Israel, which they had broken off when that country attacked the Gaza Strip in December 2008. Netanyahu was prepared to talk as long as no preconditions were set by the Palestinians.

In the end, he got what he wanted. He met neither Palestinian preconditions nor those of the Obama administration. Simply put, it was Obama who bent to Netanyahu's will. The tail wagged the dog.

The hapless officials of the Palestinian Authority read the writing on the wall. After some ritual huffing and puffing, they agreed to participate in "proximity talks" with the Netanyahu government in which Washington's Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, would shuttle back and forth between the two sides. These started on May 9. Over the next four months, Mitchell's tough task will be to try to narrow the yawning differences on the terms of Palestinian statehood - when both sides now know that Obama will shy away from pressuring Israel where it hurts.

Spat with China, then a sudden thaw

Obama's problems with the People's Republic of China (PRC) began in November 2009, when, to his disappointment, the Chinese government failed to accord him the royal treatment he had expected on his first visit to the country.

Washington-Beijing relations cooled further when the Obama administration greenlighted the sale of US\$6.4 billion worth of advanced weaponry to Taiwan, including anti-missile missiles, and Obama met the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, at the White House. The PRC regards Taiwan as a breakaway province and Tibet as an integral part of the republic.

Senior US officials described the moves as part of Obama's concerted drive to "push back" at China which, in his view, was punching above its weight. Along with these moves went unrelenting pressure on Beijing, in private and in public, to revalue its currency, the yuan. The administration repeatedly highlighted a legal provision requiring the Treasury Department to report twice a year on any country that has been manipulating the rate of exchange between its currency and the American dollar to gain unfair advantage in international trade. That the next due date for such a report, a preamble to possible sanctions, was April 15 was repeated by US officials ad nauseam.

In mid-April, Obama was convening an international summit on nuclear security in Washington. He was eager to have as many heads of state as possible attend. At the very least, he wanted the leaders of the four nuclear powers with UN Security Council vetoes - Britain, France, Russia, and China - present.

That provided Chinese President Hu Jintao with a powerful card to play at a moment when a White House threat to name his country as a currency manipulator hung over his head. He refused to attend the Washington nuclear summit. Obama blinked. He postponed the Treasury Department's judgment day. In return, Hu came and met Obama at the White House.

That tensions existed between Beijing and Washington did not surprise China's leaders, a collective of hard-nosed realists. Their attitude was reflected in an editorial in the official newspaper, the China Daily, soon after Obama's inauguration. "US leaders have never been shy about talking about their country's ambition," it said. "For them, it is divinely granted destiny no matter what other nations think." The editorial went on to predict that "Obama's defense of US interests will inevitably clash with those of other nations." And so they have, repeatedly.

Such realism contrasted starkly with the mood prevalent at the White House, where it was naively believed that a few well-scripted speeches in foreign capitals by the eloquent new president would restore US prestige left in tatters by George W Bush's policies. What the president and his coterie seem not to have noticed, however, was an important Pew Research Center poll. It showed that, following Obama's public diplomacy

campaign, while the image of the US had indeed risen sharply in Europe, [Mexico](#), and Brazil, any improvement was minor in [India](#) and China, marginal in the Arab Middle East, and nonexistent in Russia, Pakistan, and Turkey.

Stuck in its self-congratulatory mode, the Obama team paid scant attention to the full range of options that other powers had for retaliating to its pressure. For instance, it did not foresee Beijing threatening sanctions against major American companies supplying weapons to Taiwan, nor did it anticipate the stiff resistance the PRC would offer to revaluing the yuan.

Some attributed Beijing's behavior to a rising Chinese nationalism and the fears of its leaders that bending under pressure from "foreigners" would play poorly at home. But the real reasons for Chinese resistance had more to do with hard economics than popular sentiment. In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-09, symbolized by the collapse of the gigantic Lehman Brothers investment bank, China's leaders noted tectonic changes occurring in the international economic balance of power - at the expense of the hitherto "sole superpower".

While the US and European economies contracted, Beijing quickly adopted policies aimed at boosting domestic demand and infrastructure investment. This resulted in impressive expansion: 9% growth in the gross domestic product in 2009 with a prediction of 12% in the current year. This led Goldman Sachs' analysts to advance their forecast of the year when China would become the globe's number one economy from 2050 to 2027.

For the first time since World War II, it was not the United States that pulled the rest of the world out of negative growth, but China. The US has emerged from the financial carnage as the most heavily indebted nation on Earth, and China as its leading creditor with an unprecedented \$2.4 trillion in foreign reserves.

Its cash-rich corporations are now buying companies and future natural resources from Australia to Peru, Canada to Afghanistan where, last year, the Congjiang Copper Group, a Chinese corporation, offered \$3.4 billion - \$1 billion more than the highest bid by a Western metallurgy company - to secure the right to mine copper from one of the richest deposits on the planet.

Karzai the menace becomes Karzai the indispensable

On assuming the presidency, Obama made no secret of his dislike for his Afghan counterpart, Hamid Karzai. To circumvent his central government's pervasive corruption, senior American officials came up with the idea of dealing directly with Afghan provincial and district governors. In the presidential election of August 2009, their preference for Abdullah Abdullah, a serious rival to Karzai, was widely known.

When Karzai resorted to massive vote rigging to ensure his reelection and turned a deaf ear to Washington's exhortations to clean up his administration, Obama decided to use a stick to bring Washington's latest client regime in line. In a dramatic gesture, he undertook an air journey of 26 hours - from Washington to Kabul - over the last weekend

in March to deliver a 26-minute lecture to Karzai on the corruption and administrative ineptitude of his government. The Afghan leader had few options but to listen in stony silence.

When, however, Karzai read a news story in which an unnamed senior American military official suggested that his younger half-brother, Ahmed Wali, the power broker in the southern province of Kandahar, deserved to be put on the Pentagon's list of drug barons to be killed or captured, his patience snapped.

An incensed Afghan president responded by claiming that the US was deliberately intensifying and widening the war in [Afghanistan](#) in order to stay in the region and dominate it. He added that, if Washington's pressure continued, he might join the Taliban. (He had, in fact, been a significant fundraiser for the Taliban after they captured Kabul in September 1996.)

Obama reacted as he had done in the past. When facing a serious challenge, he retreated. From being a stick wielder he morphed into a carrier of carrots during a Karzai visit to Washington early this month (which, in March, administration officials were threatening to postpone indefinitely).

The high point of the wooing of Karzai - worthy of being included in a modern version of *Alice in Wonderland* - was a dinner Vice-President Joe Biden gave for the Afghan dignitary at his residence. At the very least, Karzai must have been bemused. In February, Biden had staged a dramatic walk-out halfway through a dinner at the Afghan president's palace after Karzai denied that his government was corrupt or that, if it was, he was at fault.

Despite the Obama administration's "red carpet treatment" and "charm offensive", Karzai was boldly honest at a joint press conference with Obama when he described Iran as "our bother country, our friend".

The same sentiments would soon be expressed by another leader - in Brazil.

Da Silva thumbs his nose at Obama

Ever since assuming the presidency of Brazil in 2003, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has, when necessary, not hesitated to challenge US policy moves. He has clashed with Washington on world trade (the Doha round), global warming, and continuing US sanctions against Cuba.

In December 2008, he chaired a meeting of 31 Latin American and Caribbean countries, which excluded the United States, at the Brazilian tourist [resort](#) of Sauipe. The next month, instead of going to the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, da Silva attended the Eighth World Social Forum at Belem, at the mouth of the Amazon River.

He was critical of the way Obama compromised democracy in Honduras, and, despite the

Obama administration's dismay and opposition, he invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Brasilia in November 2009 for talks on the Iranian nuclear program, his first attempt at high-profile international diplomacy. (A week earlier he had warmly received Israeli President Shimon Peres in the Brazilian capital.) Six months later, he paid a return visit to Tehran - and made history, much to the chagrin of Washington.

Acting in tandem with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, da Silva revived a putative October 2009 nuclear agreement and brokered an unexpected deal with Ahmadinejad. Iran agreed to ship 1,200 kilograms of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey; in return, Russia and France would provide 120kg of 20% enriched uranium for a medical research reactor in Tehran.

Taken by surprise and rattled by the success of Brazil and Turkey in the face of American disapproval, the Obama administration reverted to the stance of the Bush White House and demanded that Iran suspend its program to enrich nuclear fuel. It then moved to push an agreement on further UN sanctions against Iran, as if the Brazilians and Turks had accomplished nothing.

This refusal to register reality was myopic at best. The blinkered view of the present White House ignores salient global facts. The influence of mid-level powers on the world stage is on the rise. Their leaders feel - rightly - that they can ignore or bypass the Obama administration's demands. And, on the positive side, they can come together on certain international issues and take diplomatic initiatives of their own with a fair chance of success.

By now, from Afghanistan to Honduras, Brazil to China, global leaders large and small increasingly sense that the Obama administration's bark is worse than its bite, and though the US remains a major power, it is no longer the determinative one. The waning of the truncated American century is by now irreversible.