

# Obama's Way with the World: Collegiality, Empathy, Realism, Pragmatism, Optimism?

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In an interview with TIME magazine on 5 December 2008, the then US president-elect Barack Obama made clear his highly pragmatic approach to the gravest dangers he and the world face in international politics:

Managing a more effective strategy in Afghanistan will be a top priority. Recognizing that it is not simply an Afghanistan problem but it's an Afghanistan–Pakistan–India–Kashmir–Iran problem is going to be a priority. Sorting through our policy with respect to Iran effectively—that will be a priority ... Trying to build a more effective relationship with the newly assertive ... Russia—that is going to be a priority. And seeing if we can build on some progress, at least in conversation that's been made around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be a priority. ... And, finally, managing our relationship with China and the entire Pacific Rim, I think, is something that will keep not just me busy but my successor busy.<sup>1</sup>

Obama's clear fondness for the words 'problem' and 'priority' (as against 'threat' or 'crisis') was an indication of his orientation towards consensus. His security appointments—Hillary Clinton (an old rival), Robert Gates (a Republican), James Jones (a retired US Marine Corps four-star general)—were an indication of his political 'smarts'. No one is likely to mistake them for 'doves', and that is an advantage in regard to mainstream US electorate opinion, though a disappointment to the Left. Back in 1972, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were able to make a deal with China that would have had every US conservative screaming 'betrayal' if it had been made by a Democrat, because they were armoured by their reputations as tough right-wing Republicans. That deal with Mao Zedong's China is still the basis of the current relationship with a very different China.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, almost 40 years on, China has fewer reasons than ever to risk any deterioration of its relationship with the United States, as it embarks on a strategy of more reliance on its own home market and less on exports. So the original decision has paid off long-term.

There is a sort of parallel between the need, back in 1972, of constructing a less dangerous relationship with China, and the need in 2009 of constructing a less dangerous set of relationships with and between the societies of another vast swathe of the world—the turbulent region that stretches from the borders of Turkey to the ungovernable zone between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Obama's recognition that something urgently needs to be done about that particular set of problems is therefore hopeful and, though optimistic, seems to be based on realism as to what can be accomplished and on a determination to try new strategies.

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Since the election there has been floating about in the expectant corridors of power in Washington something called a 'grand design'—looking to make some progress through the Palestine–Iran–Pakistan–India–Kashmir–Afghanistan quagmire of issues, with some reconsideration even of the Durand Line, that relic of the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> and the future of the powerful Pashtun tribes. Presumably it would involve a 'task force' of diplomats and strategists, probably at the Assistant Secretary of State level. The Europeans and the Arabs would also be involved. The first line of approach will be vis-à-vis Syria, and a deal there seems practicable.

The recent crisis in Gaza may be the most immediate reminder of the local difficulties, but it is by no means the most dangerous aspect of the problems. India and Pakistan are nuclear powers, and Iran may become one. That is, and will remain, the most dangerous current source of potential crisis for Obama and for the world as a whole. Since the attacks in Mumbai in late November 2008, both the government in New Delhi and that in Islamabad have been visibly restrained in their reactions—more so than many of their own respective citizens would wish. But just one more serious attack in India might make that restraint almost impossible to maintain for New Delhi. The past role of the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) is well known in India, and Lashkar-e-Toiba, which the ISI sponsored, is the most obvious suspect as the hand behind the jihadists. But recent Pakistani acknowledgement of the connection, and arrest of some of those involved, may defuse tensions a little.

The most turbulent of those regions—FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas)—may, for the foreseeable future, remain ungovernable as far as the central government is concerned, but there have been signals about deals with the most powerful of the local tribal chiefs, which would be more consonant with the traditions of the area. The forces arrayed against the Westerners are not so much an organised Taliban army as a loose alliance of warlords, drug runners, jihadists, tribal militias and any other Afghan who resents seeing Western armies on their territory. So it is not a good battlefield for NATO deployments, long trained and equipped to combat Russian tanks on the North German plain. The European governments know that no Westerners since Alexander the Great have done much good for themselves in Afghanistan, so it is not surprising they remain reluctant to put their troops in harm's way. Richard Holbrooke's appointment to cover both Afghanistan and Pakistan was useful, since the two sets of issues are interdependent and there is mention of what has been called an 'Af-Pak' solution. But Pakistan is much the more vital of the two if it comes to a crisis, and it could come to a very dangerous one.

Possibly things are however becoming a bit more promising on Iran. Elections are due there on 12 June 2009, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has reportedly lost favour with the electorate, mostly for domestic economic reasons. More important (and perhaps also the true course of power in that society) is Ayatollah Khamenei. Like the rest of the world, that grey eminence may well be intrigued by the emergence of a US president whose skin is brown and whose middle name is Hussein. That name has a special sacredness for the Shia. More reasonable policymakers than Ahmadinejad have entered the electoral fray, which may be an indication of the Ayatollah's recent judgements, especially after Ahmadinejad's speech at the April 2009 'United against Racism' conference in Geneva,<sup>4</sup> which damaged not only Iran's name, but the UN connection. US policy has changed too, judging by the signals from Obama.

Because of the outcome of the Iraq conflict, the Shia have recently gained enhanced regional power, and the Ayatollah might possibly see the advent of this surprising chief decision-maker in Washington as a strategic moment to seek a better relationship with the United States. In particular, Obama's decision to give his first post-inauguration television interview to the Arab network, Al Arabiya, via Hisham Melhem, a well-known Lebanese journalist, was very astute, ensuring that his words, translated into Arabic, were likely to reach every Arab

almost instantly.<sup>5</sup> And of course the childhood connection with Indonesia means that he already has many friends there.<sup>6</sup>

Some Australians may be worried that Obama put relations with China at the end of his list of preoccupations, even hinting that he did not expect it to be a problem until the time of his successor which, as an optimist, he must expect to be as late as 2017. Indeed he has sought engagement with China which, in my view, is a logical approach.<sup>7</sup> The only solid diplomatic success of the Bush years was the creation and maintenance of easy relations with all three of the Asian great powers: China, India and Japan. That was not initially on the cards. During the first eight months of George W. Bush's first term, the United States and China often looked to be on a collision course, especially on 2 April 2001 when a US spy plane was forced to make an emergency landing on Hainan Island following a mid-air incident until and then crew detained for nine days.<sup>8</sup> But once the US decision was taken, almost immediately after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, for the invasion of Afghanistan, it was instantly apparent to every Washington strategist that the troops would need to be deployed and supplied through Pakistan or Central Asia—preferably both—and that to keep those lines secure there must be good relations also with India and Russia. So at least one could argue that they recognised a necessity when they saw one.

One of the major irritants of the Bush years for Moscow was a plan, enthusiastically endorsed by George W. Bush himself, to put elements of a US anti-missile system (an anti-missile installation in Poland, and a radar system in the Czech Republic) inside what the Russians see as their strategic perimeter. Bush argued, implausibly, that it was to defend Europe from missile attack from Iran. But it looked more like a sort of mini US version of what provoked the great crisis of 1962 when Moscow installed Soviet missiles inside the US strategic perimeter—90 miles from Florida, in Cuba. So it was one of the worst ideas of the Bush Administration, and provoked the Russians to threaten a retaliatory installation of missiles in Kaliningrad, inside what one might call NATO's strategic perimeter. Once Obama hinted at doubts about the Bush strategy, however, Vladimir Putin promptly replied with a withdrawal of the threat about Kaliningrad, and cordial words, at least for the time being, even about an airbase in Central Asia. So there seems a better prospect in that most potentially lethal relationship—even a new prospect on the reduction of nuclear stockpiles.

Within the Latin American world, where the Bush policies had provoked some of the most vitriolic responses, Obama seems to be on the way to successfully mending fences. His eloquence and congeniality went over well with the other heads of government at the fifth Summit of the Americas in April 2009, though not with some of his Republican critics back in Washington.<sup>9</sup> The policy on Cuba has been relaxed, with regards to funds transfer and family visits. But of course much will depend on the success or failure of global plans for coping with the current and ongoing economic crisis. Unless members of the G20 can manage to keep the recession short and shallow for most economies, the pressures for protectionism may become too strong for many governments and produce dangerous new conflicts.

The situation in Pakistan, where the Taliban have been increasingly influential—indeed even dominant in places—has carried more urgent dangers of strategic crisis than even in Afghanistan. It is too early yet to judge whether a new US toughness towards the Pakistani regime, indicated by Hillary Clinton will be effective.

Many people believe that, in contemporary circumstances, it is impossible to be both a realist and an optimist. Yet Obama seems still to be managing it, and that remains a major political and diplomatic asset, not only for him but for the world. Global policy needs to be inspired, and based on, a hopeful determination to do something effective, whether the major governments (the G20) are dealing with the prospect of an influenza pandemic or the reality of the world economic crisis. Obama seems the right person by temperament and background to lead those efforts. It is still too early to judge whether these initial successes,

derived largely from his personal charisma and congeniality, are accompanied by the necessary steel inside the velvet glove of his eloquence. But the transfer of veteran Senator Arlen Specter from the Republican ranks to those of the Democrats is at least a testimony for his early achievements.

## Notes

- 1 On Friday 5 December 2008, US president-elect Barack Obama was interviewed at his transition offices in Chicago by TIME's Richard Stengel, David Von Drehle and John Huey. The interview is detailed in the 29 December 2008 issue of TIME (p. 50) and in the earlier 17 December 2008 issue of the magazine when it named Obama as its 'Person of the Year'. This special issue can be viewed at <[http://www.time.com/time/specials/2008/personoftheyear/article/0,31682,1861543\\_1865068\\_1865069,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/2008/personoftheyear/article/0,31682,1861543_1865068_1865069,00.html)>, accessed 30 April 2009.
- 2 The *Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China*, also known as the 'Shanghai Communiqué' was a diplomatic document issued by the United States and China on 27 February 1972 during the Nixon's visit to China. The document pledged that it was in the interest of all nations for the United States and China to work towards the normalisation of their relations, although this would not occur until another joint communiqué seven years later. *The Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations* released on 1 January 1979 established official relations between the United States and China.
- 3 The Durand Line (named after Sir Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of the British Indian government) is the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was established on 12 November 1893 to demarcate the border between Afghanistan and what was then British India (now Pakistan's provinces North-West Frontier Province, Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Balochistan).
- 4 The Durban Review Conference took place between 20 and 24 April 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland. It evaluated progress towards the goals set by the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. The outcomes of the conferences are noted at <<http://www.un.org/durbanreview2009/>>, accessed 30 April 2009. For details on Ahmadinejad's speech, see Neil MacFarquhar, 'Iranian Calls Israel Racist at Meeting in Geneva', *New York Times*, 20 April 2009.
- 5 Hisham Melhem's 27 January 2009 interview with US President Barack Obama on the Dubai-based satellite television channel Al-Arabiya is available at <<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/01/27/65087.html>>, accessed 30 April 2009. Melhem is the Washington bureau chief of Al-Arabiya.
- 6 Between 1967 and 1971 (at ages six to ten), Barack Obama attended local schools in Jakarta, including Besuki Public School and St. Francis of Assisi School.
- 7 Hu Jintao has invited Barack Obama to visit China later in 2009. A statement to this effect was issued after Obama met Hu at the US ambassador's residence in London ahead of the G20 economic summit. The talks (to include US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) have been dubbed the 'Strategic and Economic Dialogue'
- 8 On 1 April 2001, a US signals surveillance aircraft and a People's Liberation Army Navy interceptor fighter jet collided mid-air, causing the death of a Chinese pilot and an emergency landing by the US aircraft on Hainan. The crew were detained and interrogated by Chinese authorities until a letter of apology was issued by the US Government. The crew was released on 11 April 2001.
- 9 The fifth Summit of the Americas was held 17–19 April 2009 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Its theme was 'Securing Our Citizens' Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability' (see <<http://www.summit-americas.org/>>, accessed 30 April 2009).