

Obama must move beyond pseudo-events

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Commentary by

Monday, May 11, 2009

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Pundits in Washington and elsewhere have yet to outline US President Barack Obama's Grand Strategy, or to provide an account of an Obama Doctrine of foreign policy akin to the more dramatic changes he has made in American economic policy. All they can point to is a series of "pseudo events," the term that historian Daniel Boorstin coined to depict activity that exists for the purpose of the media publicity and has no immediate effect on real life.

From that perspective, Obama's recent trip to Europe, in which he addressed the G-20 and NATO summits and the Turkish Parliament, as well as his participation in the Summit of the Americas, have been regarded by most of the American media as foreign policy "successes." He has won praise for meeting with top world leaders and for his television appearances aimed at audiences in the Middle East, including the Iranian people.

But in reality, Obama can claim no concrete diplomatic accomplishments. Europe's public and elites have been mesmerized by Obama's personal charisma and multilateralist rhetoric; but NATO remains a relic of the Cold War and its leading members have been reluctant to send more of their troops to help the United States fight in Afghanistan. The "resetting" of Russian-American relationship may have symbolic value but has yet to produce any major policy changes. Residents of the Middle East may have been impressed by Obama's peaceful intentions, but there has been no sign of progress on resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis or in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And notwithstanding all the anticipation for a change in US policy toward Cuba, the US economic embargo that was imposed in 1962 still remains in place.

Indeed, as they to grade the new White House occupant's first 100 days in office, observers will find it difficult to conclude whether Obama's first foreign policy's steps have really strengthened American power in the world. On the progressive left, commentators and activists have been disappointed that Obama's commitments to reverse Bush's foreign policy have not been carried out. Meanwhile, critics on the right argue that, if anything, the efforts by Obama and his aides to project a less confrontational approach, like the one embraced by former President George W. Bush, reflects a sense of weakness or even defeatism.

But these critics are wrong. The Bush administration's belligerent style of managing American relations with both friends and foes, so full of empty bravado and a crusading militaristic spirit, has been one of the reasons for the erosion in US global prestige in the last eight years. Obama's emphasis on quiet diplomacy and international engagement that is backed by a genuine sense of confidence and a strong military should prove to be more effective in promoting US interests abroad.

One could imagine, for example, Obama's predecessor responding to the recent pirate attack off the coast of Somalia by labeling the pirates as "Islamofascists," adding them to the list of members of Axis of Evil, and threatening tough American military retaliation. By contrast, Obama's measured response followed by a low-key but precise military action is the kind of cool approach one expects from American