

'Bush Doctrine' echoes on Middle East

Obama to explain strategy for democracy in region

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President Barack Obama boards Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., as he travels to Memphis, Tenn., for private meetings with families affected by the flooding and to deliver the commencement address at Booker T. Washington High School, Monday, May 16, 2011. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

By Dave Boyer

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President Obama will try this week to clarify his muddled strategy for promoting democracy in the Middle East, with lawmakers from both political parties and world leaders waiting to assess quickly whether his approach has muscle.

Mr. Obama's first speech on the Middle East, in Cairo in 2009, beseeched the Muslim world to set aside differences with the West and engage in a dialogue. In style, Mr. Obama's call was different from the "Bush Doctrine," George W. Bush's policy of promoting democracy on a broad scale to fight terrorism and using military power if necessary to topple authoritarian regimes.

But in practice, Mr. Obama's strategy for the region has resembled the Bush Doctrine at times. Mr. Obama has supported a NATO bombing campaign in Libya to back rebels against dictator Col. Moammar Gadhafi, authorized targeted killings in Pakistan, and launched a missile strike in Yemen aimed at Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric who is a top al Qaeda leader. The president also has approved a troop surge in Afghanistan.

In the wake of "Arab Spring" uprisings and the death of Osama bin Laden, Mr. Obama plans to deliver a speech on the Middle East on Thursday at the State Department.

"The Obama doctrine of negotiating with our enemies and relying on international organizations was a complete failure," said James Carafano, an analyst on defense and homeland security at the conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation. "The only time he's been successful is when he's abandoned his own tenets. What we really need is not a speech, but a strategy."

As the Syrian government's reprisals against civilian protesters have mounted, the administration has done little to challenge the troublesome regime aside from expressing its consternation.

"It has mystified me and others as to why the administration has been so slow-footed" in Syria, said Steven Cook, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "The administration seems to be passing up a tremendous strategic opportunity."

Mr. Obama doesn't have a doctrine for the Middle East, said Chris Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "They may try to construct one after the fact, but the United States was not an active party to most of these revolts," Mr. Preble said.

The United States mostly watched from the sidelines during the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere. Some analysts say the time for a presidential address has passed. "If you're a rooster, you're always going to claim credit for the sun rising," Mr. Preble said.

Administration officials say the president's speech, more than two weeks after a Navy SEAL team killed bin Laden in Pakistan, gives Mr. Obama an opportunity to reaffirm his goals for the region and highlight the failure of extremism.

"He is optimistic," White House spokesman Jay Carney said of the president. "It's obviously a very fluid situation, and every country is different. But he is optimistic about the potential for positive outcomes in the various countries in the region. The future of that region will be written by the people of that region."

Mr. Carney said Mr. Obama's speech will outline "where we are in this remarkable period" of popular uprisings that have rocked repressive regimes in Libya, Syria and elsewhere. The administration announced the resignation last week of former Sen.

George Mitchell, special envoy to the Middle East and a key diplomat in the region, who made little progress in reconciling Israelis and Palestinians.

The president meets with Jordan's King Abdullah II on Tuesday and with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday. Israeli troops killed Palestinian protesters over the weekend in a wave of border clashes.

Mr. Carney said the president "will call as he has in the past on the governments in the region to respond to those demands through peaceful political dialogue - not just because it's the right thing to do for these people of these countries, but because it is in the interest of stability."

Congressional lawmakers affiliated with both parties say Mr. Obama must reaffirm the U.S. alliance with Israel. Mr. Carafano said the Obama speech won't be worth much if the president fails to use tough words against Iran.

"It should start with Iran," he said. "Iran is the biggest troublemaker in the Middle East."

Mr. Carney said the administration understands Iran's role in the crisis in Syria, where government forces have killed hundreds of civilians and detained thousands of protesters during two months of unrest. "The Syrian government continues to follow the lead of its Iranian ally in resorting to brute force and flagrant violations of human rights and suppressing peaceful protests," he said.

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