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Foreign policy week: Can Obama walk his talk?

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by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Sept. 22 (Xinhua) -- Eight months into his presidency, Barack Obama began to face questions as to whether he could translate his words into deeds. Now, he is about to take his hardest foreign policy test yet.

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Shortly after being sworn in as president, he traveled from Egypt to Europe via Turkey, wowing audiences with uplifting speeches that signaled an end to what much of the world viewed as former President Bush's abrasive "cowboy" diplomacy.



U.S. President Barack Obama watches Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (R) shake hands during a trilateral meeting in New York September 22, 2009. (Xinhua/Reuters Photo)
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Obama's message was one of unity rather than unilateralism, of listening rather than launching ultimatums. He even voiced his respect for the achievements of age-old cultures. But now, after eight months in office and a lot of talk, critics contend that Obama has yet to perform.

Obama's schedule this week is packed with speeches and meetings. On Tuesday, he attended UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's meeting on climate change, a warm-up for December's international conference in Copenhagen, Denmark.

On the same day, he met with the Chinese president in New York and will hold talks with his Russian counterpart and the Japanese prime minister Wednesday. He will also address the UN General Assembly and chair the UN Security Council before traveling to Pittsburgh for the G20 summit.

Analysts note that while Obama is personally more popular with foreign leaders than his predecessor, most have failed to heed his requests. Israel brushed off his calls to halt the expansion of settlements, allies in Europe have contributed few troops to Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia paid little attention to his appeal for concessions to Israel.

This week, however, the world was looking for tangible results instead of heartfelt speeches on a number of foreign policy issues, analysts said.

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U.S. President Barack Obama (F) addresses the opening ceremony of the United Nations Climate Change Summit at the UN headquarters in New York Sept. 22, 2009. (Xinhua/Shen Hong)

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Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Washington-based Cato Institute, said the president could take a few simple steps to start thawing the United States' frosty relations with Iran.

During his campaign, Obama said he would talk with Iranian leadership, albeit without preconditions, which has irritated many of his critics. But others hoped for reconciliation between the two nations, which have been at odds for nearly three decades.

Innocent said the president could peel back covert U.S. funding to dissident groups in Iran, a policy instituted under the previous administration. It would constitute a definitive move toward rapprochement, although many believe Iran should make the first move.

A swift reduction of U.S. troop presence in Iraq was another practical move Obama could make, and one that would boost relations with the Islamic world, she said. "If he sticks to that, it will mean a lot to the world."

The U.S. forces have withdrawn from major cities but remain in non-urban areas.

Continuing to call on the Israelis to halt the expansion of settlements on the West Bank would also show an even-handedness not seen in many of his predecessors.

Indeed, the president on Tuesday hosted a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, in spite of stalled peace talks. The meeting yielded few tangible results, although the president said progress was still possible.

"It's absolutely critical that we get this issue resolved," Obama said Tuesday, referring to a topic that has bedeviled U.S. presidents for decades.



U.S. President Barack Obama delivers remarks during a rally on health insurance reform at College Park, Maryland, on Sept. 17 2009. (Xinhua/Zhang Yan)

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At the start of Obama's presidency, it was thought that the president's personal finesse and

multilateralism would smooth relations with other nations and help advance U.S. interests. But some analysts said that while personal relations were important, popularity only goes so far, and national interests dominate in the end.

Others, however, contend Obama's popularity among world leaders has made countries more willing to share intelligence on Al-Qaeda and other international terror groups.

"That shows that a more multilateral approach does bear fruit as opposed to the unilateralism under Bush," Innocent reasoned.

Despite these critics, the president has indeed made a few foreign policy achievements, such as winning Russia's approval to use its airspace to fly to Afghanistan.

Stewart Patrick of the Council on Foreign Relations said that a significant leadership opportunity would arise on Thursday when Obama chairs the UN Security Council meeting.

Gaining an agreement on Iran's nuclear program would be a tangible achievement. And signing a resolution, including a pledge not to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state, would also be a step forward, Patrick added.

Thomas Kirlin, vice president and co-chair of the energy and environment working group at the Washington-based Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, said Obama must work with Congress to address concerns in the Senate about how the United States can change to cleaner energy sources in a way that also engages developing countries.

George Edwards, political science professor at Texas A&M University, said the president had already moved beyond talk on some issues. "The president has stuck to his guns with the drawdown in Iraq," he said.

And in Afghanistan, he had shifted resources to the war-torn country to focus on ousting the Taliban, he added.

"That's what he promised to do, to put attention where it needed to be," Edwards concluded. "Whether he does more in terms of the latest request (for more troops) is another matter."

Editor: Li Xianzhi

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