

The pop president
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P. 5

Barack Obama's recent speech in Cairo on Islam and the West was yet another rendezvous in Obama's romance with the wider world.

The last time George W. Bush visited the Middle East, he was dodging shoes. When Obama went to the region, by contrast, he was catching bouquets. Indeed as he left the stage in Cairo University's Great Hall, members of the overwhelmingly Arab audience were chanting 'Obama! Obama!'

Why does this new president enjoy such remarkable international prestige? Some of the answer has to do with America. Most people know instinctively that claims of American decline are exaggerated and that for a long time to come, Washington will be central to the resolution of all the great international issues. Consequently there is relief that George Bush, who was by turns intransigent and hapless, has been replaced by someone of Obama's talent and agility.

The victory of this talented newcomer chimes with those aspects of American society that the world likes best: its openness and receptiveness to talent.

And the idea of an African-American president is attractive to anybody moved by the injustice of slavery, in particular those on the margins of international society.

It's not just Obama's Americanness that appeals, however: it's also his multinational makeup. All quarters of the world claim kinship with Obama: Europeans discern a similar mindset; Muslims look to his middle name; Africans recall his lineage; Asians think of his upbringing.

Every foreign trip, therefore, has the feeling of a homecoming – or at least a major cultural event. In July, Obama is scheduled to visit Ghana, where he will visit the hub of the British slave trade, the Cape Coast Castle. In November he is expected to visit his childhood home in Jakarta. Images from the slave dungeons of Africa and the streets of Indonesia may turn out to be as powerful as those of Obama's inauguration on the brilliant white steps of the US Capitol.

Can people tire of all this? Yes they can, and perhaps sooner than we think – but for the moment Obama is backing up his international charm offensive with an impressive display of diplomacy.

Obama has inherited diabolical international challenges from his predecessor – including bloody wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, nuclear programs in Iran (led by a re-elected President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) and North Korea (led by an ailing Kim Jong-il and his successor), a shrinking economy and a heating planet – but so far his policy responses have been adroit. Obama has not yet faced his most challenging tests, but only a partisan critic could deny that he is off to a very sure-footed start.

Four themes can be identified in Obama's foreign policy, the first of which is ambition. Obama is not lacking in self-confidence. On his first day in the White House, Press Secretary Robert Gibbs reported that he 'looked very comfortable in his surroundings' – notwithstanding that a mere four years earlier, his surroundings were the Illinois State Senate.

Obama's confidence extends from the personal to the political. He has promised to change the way America is perceived, work towards a nuclear-free world, bring peace to the Holy Land and effect a comprehensive settlement between Israelis and Arabs, and avert a climate

catastrophe at the same time that he retools the financial system and kick-starts an economic recovery.

The second theme is pragmatism. On Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, Obama has been prepared to shade his campaign promises in order to conform with the advice of his military commanders.

Obama has an instinctive attraction to things that work, and few scruples about jettisoning ideas or people for the greater good of his political project. His decision to appoint Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State strengthened his administration but also stunted the careers of many loyal foreign policy wonks who had spurned Clinton in the primaries and signed up with the insurgent Obama campaign instead.

Obama's pre-presidential writings and speeches on foreign policy were mainly free of ideological content, and some of his statements since his inauguration reveal a professorial kind of pragmatism. In Europe, for instance, Obama was asked whether he believes in American exceptionalism. Most unexpectedly, he replied: 'I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.' It appears Obama did not receive the memo from which US presidents are supposed to read. Does he not realise that America is entirely unique, a shining city on a hill which cannot possibly be compared with other countries?

The third theme is liberalism. Obama had a very liberal voting record in Illinois and in the US Senate. Unlike other Democratic candidates for president, he did not stew for decades in the Washington foreign policy soup. He did not believe that he had to look tougher than the Republicans in order to beat them.

Obama's liberalism is evident in many of his foreign policy decisions: the announcement of plans to close the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay; the declaration that the US will not torture and the release of documents showing that it did so in the past; his comments on nuclear weapons; his pointed de-emphasis of freedom in favour of development; and the ending of Washington's macabre dance of climate change denial, scepticism and delay.

The final, related, theme is that of engagement. He has appointed one of the world's most famous people as his chief diplomat and installed big beasts such as Richard Holbrooke and George Mitchell as special envoys. He recorded a video message to the Iranian people commemorating the Persian New Year, pressed 'reset' on relations with Russia, and made nice with Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. Obama is no pacifist, as the Somali pirates holding Captain Richard Phillips discovered – but diplomacy is certainly on the rise.

All this makes for an impressive combination. Most of it is good news for Australia, although we will have to be smarter and work harder than we have in the past to get access to Washington's inner councils. Obama doesn't know Australia well, and he's not really an alliance man anyway, and the competition for the president's attention is fiercer than it has been since John Kennedy's day. Perhaps the single biggest thing in our favour is that, like his American counterpart, our prime minister is a pragmatic policy wonk from the centre-left.

Of course, Obama's strategy of engagement has the defect of its qualities. Bush's approach of punishing adversaries by not speaking to them clearly was not working. It makes sense to reach out to competitors and try to identify mutual interests. But not all interests are mutual or even reconcilable. International relations is an unsentimental business, and to succeed in it you need to deploy leverage and pressure as well as sweet reason.

John McCain can testify to the fact that Obama knows a little about applying pressure. So far, though, on international as well as domestic issues such as farm subsidies and the assault weapons ban, Obama has been surprisingly quick to compromise. A rare exception has been Washington's public dispute with Israel over settlements, in which Obama is squeezing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu between his government's attachment to the settlers and the Israeli public's attachment to good relations with its US ally.

If Obama is to be a great foreign policy president, he needs to demonstrate that there are significant costs to be incurred for opposing him on important issues. Machiavelli thought it was good to be loved but more important to be feared. As Obama deals with unpleasant regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang and tries to force his way through the thicket of national interests on climate change, he may wish to download some Machiavelli onto his BlackBerry along with the Miles Davis and the Jay-Z.

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