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Obama's diplomacy, not fully engaged

By Jackson Diehl
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Barack Obama's foreign policy has been defined so far by his attempts to "engage" with adversaries or rivals of the United States, such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran and Dmitry Medvedev of Russia. The results have been mixed. But now the president's focus is visibly shifting. In the next 18 months, Obama's record abroad will be made or broken by his ability to do business with two nominal U.S. allies: Hamid Karzai and Binyamin Netanyahu.

Karzai has become the hardest problem in Obama's Afghanistan surge, one that might be summed up as "can't win with him, can't win without him." Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu holds the key to whether Israel will be prepared to accept a Palestinian state within the two-year time frame Obama has established -- and also, perhaps, whether Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons will lead to war.

Both men are prickly and somewhat inscrutable. Both know their countries and their own careers depend on support from the United States, but both are also resistant to key elements of Obama's policies. Handling them well requires skillful and subtle diplomacy by the U.S. president and by those who carry out his policies.

And Obama has not done well. In fact, his treatment of the Israeli and Afghan leaders during one week in late March -- immediately after his victory on health care -- marked a low point of his performance as president.

First, Obama seized on an errant Israeli announcement about housing construction in East Jerusalem to reopen a pointless battle with Netanyahu. During a disastrous March 23 meeting at the White House, Obama demanded - in vain -- that Israel stop all building in Jerusalem; and at one point he left Netanyahu and his delegation to stew in the Roosevelt room while he retired to the second-floor residence for dinner.

Five days later, Obama flew to Kabul for another cold meeting, this time with Karzai. In a briefing for reporters on the plane, national security adviser James Jones made it clear that Obama was displeased with Karzai's lack of progress since beginning a new term as president last fall. In case there was any doubt, Obama spelled out that dissatisfaction in a television interview a day after his return.

Was it hubris from health care that brought on this burst of presidential imperialism? Whatever the cause, the results were disastrous. Netanyahu retreated to Jerusalem, where, after a couple of weeks of sulking, he defiantly announced that settlement construction in Jerusalem would continue. Karzai summoned Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Kabul, then delivered a tirade against Western interference that concluded with a threat to join the Taliban.

The administration has spent the past month cleaning up this mess. Obama abruptly changed his approach, sending a note to Karzai in early April thanking him for the Kabul visit and confirming his invitation to visit Washington in May -- a trip that, just days earlier, the White House had hinted at canceling. Meanwhile, the president and a good part of his Cabinet have been heaping love on Israel -- if not precisely Netanyahu -- by proclaiming their commitment to the relationship in speech after speech before pro-Israel groups.

The result is that the administration now has a detailed plan for working with Karzai over the next several months. Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, which have been delayed for two months by the flap over Jerusalem, might finally begin this week. Quiet diplomacy by the administration's special envoys in the Middle East and Afghanistan, George Mitchell and Richard Holbrooke, has achieved what presidential lectures did not.

The underlying problems, however, haven't changed. Karzai still has little appetite for attacking the corruption in his government or rallying support for U.S. military campaigns against the Taliban. Netanyahu remains wedded to a right-wing coalition that would not allow him to make significant concessions in peace negotiations, even if he wanted to.

Obama has to find a way to coax each of them toward a change of course. Public bullying won't do it. Assurances of U.S. support and stroking by special envoys go only so far. What's missing is personal chemistry and confidence, the construction of a bond between leaders that can persuade a U.S. ally to take a risk; in other words, presidential "engagement." Isn't that what Obama promised?

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