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US foreign policy: Waiting on a sun king

By Edward Luce and Daniel Dombey

Published: March 30 2010 22:22 | Last updated: March 30 2010 22:22 barack obama on the great wall of china
<<http://media.ft.com/cms/37d96f42-3c0c-11df-9412-00144feabdc0.jpg>>

Barack Obama at the Great Wall of China last year. Unlike his predecessor Richard Nixon, who turned to Henry Kissinger for advice, the US president has no big foreign policy strategist

For better or for worse, Washington has grown used to the fact that Barack Obama
<<http://www.ft.com/indepth/obama-presidency>> runs the most centralised – or “White House-centric” –

administration since Richard Nixon. When Nixon wanted foreign policy advice, everyone knew where he got it from: Henry Kissinger, variously his national security adviser and secretary of state.

In contrast, Mr Obama has no big foreign policy strategist. Even insiders give different answers when asked to whom he turns for advice on the big international questions. But almost all agree with the following observation. "The truth is that President Obama is his own Henry Kissinger – no one else plays that role," says a senior official. "Every administration reflects the personality of the president. This president wants all the trains routed through the Oval Office."

Fifteen months after he took office, the character and structure of Mr Obama's foreign policy machinery is still evolving. But from interviews with dozens of insiders and outsiders, including senior officials both authorised and unauthorised to speak, and three former national security advisers, it is clear the buck not only stops with, but often floats for quite a long time around, Mr Obama himself.

Foreigners have complained about the tendency of his domestic agenda to crowd out the international one – the passage last week of healthcare reform <<http://www.ft.com/indepth/us-healthcare-reform>> was greeted with an audible sigh of relief among US allies. But within foreign policy itself, his centralised structure can also result in many issues being left on the back burner awaiting presidential attention, say critics.

"On the positive side, we have a very conscientious president who takes advice widely," says the official. "On the debit side, for all the president's intelligence, Barack Obama came to office with very little experience. He just doesn't have much depth on some issues."

The core of Mr Obama's foreign policy machinery is in the White House-based National Security Council, which advises the president and co-ordinates activities across an increasingly complex alphabet soup of Washington departments, military commands and intelligence agencies. The most widely questioned link in the chain is Jim Jones <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0c0c8c5a-c002-11dd-9222-0000779fd18c.html>>, whom, to many people's surprise, Mr Obama brought in as his national security adviser.

Only briefly acquainted with Mr Obama beforehand, General Jones, a retired four-star marine corps general, shows little interest in running the "inter-agency" process – a key part of the job. Somewhat unconventionally, Gen Jones travels frequently and is thus often out of town. Unusually, it is Mr Obama himself who usually chairs the weekly National Security Council, known as the "principals meeting", not Gen Jones.

Rahm Emanuel, Mr Obama's chief of staff, is also a key part of it. "If you were to ask me who the real national security adviser is, I would say there were three or four, of whom Rahm is one and of which Gen Jones is probably the least important," says another official.

Anyone who has dealt with Gen Jones speaks highly of his matter-of-factness, his geniality and the respect many foreign governments have for him – Pakistan and Israel among them. But as he himself admitted rather disarmingly last year, he does not have a taste for bureaucracy. Speaking at the Atlantic Council, a think-tank where he previously worked, Gen Jones provoked laughter when he said: "I fondly remember [the Atlantic Council] as a place where people actually did what you asked them to do. In my new role I'm finding out that an order is a basis for negotiation."

The lack of a strong national security adviser has created recurring difficulties. Perhaps the best example is the Arab-Israeli peace process, which Mr Obama launched on his second day in office when he appointed George Mitchell <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b904d928-29ef-11df-b940-00144feabdc0.html>> as his envoy. Three months later, Mr Obama insisted Benjamin Netanyahu freeze all settlements activity in order to boost Arab confidence in the talks.

In a heated showdown in the Oval Office <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/159f9c90-43e1-11de-a9be-00144feabdc0.html>> last May, in which Mr Netanyahu refused to accede to Mr Obama's demand, the only officials present were Mr Emanuel and David Axelrod, senior adviser to Mr Obama in office and during the campaign. Gen Jones was not there. The fallout put the talks in abeyance and damped high Arab hopes for Mr Obama.

"The question is, which bright spark advised the president to demand a settlements freeze without working out what the next step should be when Netanyahu inevitably said 'No'?" says Leslie Gelb, an official in the Carter administration and former head of the Council on Foreign Relations. "Why wasn't George Mitchell in the room? Where was Jones?"

Mr Obama's character is also stamped on the inter-agency process, set up and managed by Tom Donilon, deputy national security adviser. The nitty-gritty of foreign policy-making is done at these frequent "deputies' meetings", which can sometimes consume four to six hours a day.

Described by one insider as "the most powerful man in the White House whose name isn't widely known", Mr Donilon, who was an official in the Clinton administration, is the man who keeps Mr Obama's trains running on time. And there are a lot of trains. Last year, Mr Donilon held 270 deputies meetings – a workload described as "clinically insane" by a former senior diplomat under Bill Clinton.

But as time goes on, it is becoming streamlined – now taking up roughly two to three hours a day, say officials. “People forget that we inherited two wars, terrorism threats, and perhaps the biggest single eight-year decline [George W. Bush’s two terms] in America’s power and reputation in our history,” says a senior official. “It took time to put in place a process that could deal with the very complex decisions we had to take.”

Also the organiser of Mr Obama’s 9.30am national security briefing, Mr Donilon reinstated the paper trails needed to prevent intra-governmental anarchy, using the model devised by Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to George Bush senior and Gerald Ford. Vice-president Joe Biden’s team was also incorporated to prevent the kind of “parallel process” Dick Cheney used to circumvent the bureaucracy under George W. Bush.

“If you look for the 2002 or 2003 meeting where the decision to go to war in Iraq was taken, you cannot find it,” says the senior official. “By getting the process right, we are improving the quality of decisions.”

The deputies’ ties go back years. For example, the families of Mr Donilon and Jim Steinberg, deputy secretary of state, often go on holiday together. Mr Donilon’s wife, Cathy Russell, is chief of staff to Jill Biden, the vice-president’s wife. Mr Steinberg’s wife, Sherburne Abbott, is deputy to John Holdren, Mr Obama’s chief scientific adviser.

All those who regularly attend, including Michèle Flournoy, a senior Pentagon official, and Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the United Nations, have known each other since at least 1993, when they started off in the Clinton administration. This is just as well, since they spend half their lives together: “A lot of work gets done in that group,” says Ms Flournoy. “Sometimes it feels like shovelling coal to keep the fires going.”

The refurbished machinery was perhaps most in evidence during the build-up to Mr Obama’s decision in December to send another 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan – a journey that took four months and involved him in 40 hours of Oval Office meetings.

But the very diligence of the process crowded out Mr Obama’s time to focus on other crises – of which there are many. “Time is the most precious commodity a president has,” says a former national security adviser. “On average he is only going to have 45 minutes a day for foreign policy, so you want to make sure it is well spent.”

The widely expected departure of Gen Jones before the end of the year has also created rivalries within the engine room. Those who are thought to have ambitions to replace him include Mr Steinberg, Ms Rice, Mr Donilon and Denis McDonough, NSC chief of staff and the foreign policy official who is personally closest to Mr Obama. Although all are widely respected, none is considered a big strategic thinker in the Kissinger or Scowcroft mould.

Described by Mr Gelb as Mr Obama’s “Lord High Executioner”, Mr McDonough “has appended himself to the Chicago crowd”, says another official. Mr McDonough’s widely feared role highlights some of the contradictions of Mr Obama’s foreign policy apparatus.

Once an adviser to former Senate majority leader Tom Daschle, Mr McDonough was frequently at Mr Obama’s side during the campaign. Insiders describe him as the “en-forcer” and as the keeper of “message discipline”, a key element of any campaign but something that can drastically slow the wheels of government.

“McDonough is the guy from the campaign and the one who plays basketball with the president – they’re very close,” says an official. “Instead of Jim Jones telling McDonough what the president thinks, it is the other way round.”

Indeed, if Mr Obama’s highly centralised foreign policy machine had a face, it would be Mr McDonough’s. “Donilon has been perceived to make the process inclusive and give everyone a seat at the table,” says David Rothkopf, a former Clinton official and scholar on the NSC. “Fairly or not, McDonough has been perceived as representing a process that was taking place in another room, among the inner circle, at a table to which most weren’t invited.”

Mr Obama has built a machine in which all roads lead to and from him. On the minus side, that means a lot of lower-level meetings without decisions. It also means neglecting issues that cannot be squeezed into his diary, such as trade policy, which continues to drift; or relations with India, which are unnecessarily tense.

And it means that the fingerprints of Mr Obama’s political inner circle are detected by the rumour mill even when they are absent, such as on the president’s decision to begin the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan

<<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/c4efd1d6-df74-11de-98ca-00144feab49a.html>> in July 2011 – a recommendation that came from Robert Gates, secretary of defence.

On the plus side, Mr Obama has a sharp learning curve, which means his administration continues to evolve. On the plus side also, if it has to be White House-centric, it is perhaps better with him as the Sun King than, say, Nixon or George W. Bush.

“At the end of each meeting, the president summarises what everyone has said and the arguments each has made with a real lawyer’s clarity,” says a participant to the NSC principals meeting, which includes Mr Gates and Mrs Clinton.

“When the president finally makes a decision, it is with the full facts and usually shows a high calibre of judgment.”

When Mr Obama makes a decision, that is.

STATE AND DEFENCE DEPARTMENTS

An 'alliance of the unsackables' finds it can confront the inner circle

If there is a caveat to the depiction of the Obama administration as White House-centric, it is in the alliance between Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates, the president's secretaries of state and defence.

Mrs Clinton has proved one of the surprises of Barack Obama's tenure, forging a strong working relationship with her former rival and establishing herself as his chief foreign policy spokesperson internationally – if not at home, where Mr Obama's inner circle often seems to monopolise the explaining.

Mr Gates, who recently decided to stay for at least another year, is seen as unsackable, not least for the credibility he lends on issues ranging from missile defence to Guantánamo Bay and Afghanistan. As a holdover from the Bush administration, his national security bona fides are hard to dispute. It is no coincidence that Mrs Clinton is probably the only other unsackable cabinet member.

The combination has made itself felt in some of the administration's most significant debates, notably on Afghanistan, where both successfully urged the deployment of more troops.

"Gates and Clinton happen to like each other, which no one really predicted," says one official, who notes that while the traditional role of the NSC is to "play referee" between the state and defence departments, it is as often nowadays a combination of the two against the White House. This is very different from how it worked when Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell held those positions.

"We work together well," Mr Gates said at an appearance with Mrs Clinton on CNN last year. "I think it starts with, frankly, based on my experience, the secretary of defence being willing to acknowledge that the secretary of state is the principal spokesperson for United States foreign policy."

Their outlooks often overlap. From the Pentagon, Mr Gates has long called for more US spending on diplomacy. As chief diplomat, Mrs Clinton has adopted a muscular approach. On Iran, both favour tough sanctions; on Russia, both have sought to reassure Moscow's neighbours even while improving relations with the Kremlin.

But for all their workmanlike co-operation, there is no escaping the fact that Mrs Clinton is not part of the Obama inner circle – a traditionally helpful feature in that job. There is also a constant "residue of friction" between Mr Obama's and Mrs Clinton's teams, according to insiders. For example, Cheryl Mills, Mrs Clinton's chief of staff, has had several run-ins with others in the administration.

One official describes Mrs Clinton as "totally loyal" to Mr Obama. He adds: "She and the president are not the best of friends – how could they be? But she totally respects the presidency – she was married to a president and she wanted to be one ... She still might be."

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