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Can Clinton Remake U.S. Diplomacy?

By Elise Labott

CNN

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Washington (CNN) -- Early on a Sunday morning in late January, Hillary Clinton walked into the State Department.

The secretary of state had already spent most of Saturday on the phone with the White House about the unraveling situation in Egypt. Now, after endless discussions, she was ready to be the face of the administration on the five network Sunday talk shows.

On one show after another, she gave them the new mantra -- the U.S. wanted an "orderly transition." It was a carefully crafted phrase which acknowledged the importance of moving to democracy in Egypt, but took into account the need to avoid chaos and a power vacuum that could bring to power a radical Islamist movement, as it did during the 1979 Iranian revolution.

The interviews were done, but Clinton's day was just starting.

After the interviews, she was off to Andrews Air Force Base to catch a plane for Haiti. The country was in the throes of a disputed presidential election which threatened to stall its recovery from the massive earthquake a year ago.

Clearly, given the events in Egypt, canceling the trip would have been understandable. But Clinton had already postponed a trip to Port-au-Prince the month before, and she was eager both to show support for the Haitian people and to press President Rene Preval to accept election monitors' conclusion that his handpicked candidate did not qualify for an upcoming runoff.

Clinton worked the phones the whole ride down to Haiti, talking to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, CIA Director Leon Panetta, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, and British Foreign Secretary William Hague, among others, about Egypt.

In between dropping in on a cholera treatment center, visiting with presidential candidates, and meeting with Preval, Clinton was on the phone with Donilon, getting updated on the latest info coming from the U.S. Embassy in Egypt. All the while, her aides were working the phones to Washington, briefing her between meetings.

For the entire flight back, Clinton huddled with her top aides, hashing out both an immediate strategy to deal with Egypt and the potential fallout across the region.

It was a fallout she herself had warned of just two weeks earlier. In a dramatic speech in Qatar, Clinton warned Arab leaders their regimes would "sink in the sand" if they did not reform their autocratic governments and create opportunities for their young citizens.

Two days after that speech, Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country after he was overthrown amid massive protests. Inspired, Egyptians began similar protests. Now, the U.S. pondered the potential fall of Hosni Mubarak -- a critical ally who for 30 years served as a linchpin of security in the Middle East -- which would dramatically affect America's entire policy in the region for years to come.

"There were a first few moments of wonderment and then she said, 'We have to dive in,'" recalled Cheryl Mills, Clinton's counselor and chief of staff.

Bad timing for a tough test

It is perhaps her toughest test yet as the nation's top diplomat. For two years, she has traveled the globe, talking about the need for countries to become more democratic, more open to technology, more open to the demands of the young.

Now it is becoming reality, and the Obama administration is struggling over how to respond.

The timing could not be worse. Clinton had hoped to start the year reviving peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians, which were in free fall after a push for an Israeli settlement freeze reached a dead end. Mubarak's support in the effort was critical, and his ouster could paralyze, if not kill, the administration's ambitious goal of achieving Palestinian statehood by the end of the year.

Events elsewhere in the world aren't looking any more promising.

World powers just concluded a fresh round of nuclear talks with Iran that produced no meaningful movement.

North and South Korea have been on a razor's edge for months. The two countries exchanged artillery fire in November after North Korea shelled a South Korean island, killing four people. Although tensions had cooled somewhat in recent months, Clinton was impatient to stop careering from crisis to crisis on the peninsula and engage Pyongyang in a meaningful way that both calmed the situation with South Korea and moved North Korea toward abandoning its nuclear ambitions.

And two months ago, Clinton suffered the loss of Richard Holbrooke, a trusted aide and confidant who, as special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, was a tireless defender of the political and diplomatic effort in Afghanistan, arguing the civilian effort was just as critical to getting the country back on its feet as the military effort.

Political skills and a dogged work ethic

It has become a full plate for a secretary of state who, by her own admission, had been reluctant to even sit at the table. Most people who rise to the position of secretary of state covet the post for much of their careers. Being the nation's top diplomat was never part of Hillary Clinton's career strategy.

But she did bring a broad set of transferable skills to the post: eight years traveling the world as first lady, political skills from her time as a senator and 2008 presidential candidate, worldview from serving on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and a dogged work ethic that has enabled her not just to master her worldwide brief, but to hold her own among lifelong experts.

"There is never a meeting where she is not the best prepared, there is never a meeting where she has not thought just about this meeting itself, but about what follows this meeting," said Kurt Campbell, assistant secretary of state for East Asia. "There is just an incredible mastery of the details. It's not just the legal brief -- you have to figure out how the world works, how it functions, how the issues are integrated."

Clinton has traveled more in her first two years than any other secretary of state, making 40 trips to 79 countries since taking office.

But for all her travels and speeches, the secretary of state has yet to turn the ideals she shares with President Obama into diplomatic achievement, argues Elliott Abrams, who served as deputy national security adviser in the previous administration.

"Two years in, nobody knows what the secretary really believes about foreign policy or what her actual role in this administration's foreign policy is. Her popularity is floating above the waves because she hasn't made any hard decisions," Abrams said.

So far, Clinton has dispelled virtually all of the predictions and stereotypes she faced when Obama tapped her for the job. Much to the chagrin of her critics, and many in the press, the predictions that Clinton would be constantly clashing with the White House or seeking to overshadow Obama never came true. There have been no sightings of a fire-breathing Hillaryzilla stomping through the Rose Garden swatting planes from the sky.

Although she hasn't enjoyed the same tight bond or round-the-clock access to Obama that her predecessor, Condoleezza Rice, had with President George W. Bush, Clinton has found a credible partnership and trust with the president, forged at their weekly one-on-one meetings and built on their similar mix of a pragmatic view of 21st century American leadership coupled with a stubborn streak of idealism.

"It's a relationship where they found over the course of the last two years how much they have in common in their worldview and approach," said Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser for strategic communications.

That mix of pragmatism and idealism was put to the test during the crisis in Egypt.

In the days leading up to Mubarak's resignation, Obama and Clinton were both sober about the need to stand with the growing protests in Tahrir Square and the importance of Mubarak ultimately transitioning from power. But some of the president's advisers wanted to be harder on Mubarak, with a clear and unequivocal call for him to step down immediately, administration officials tell CNN.

Those White House aides -- Rhodes, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, and human rights advocate Samantha Power -- believed that Obama needed to show he was true to a speech made two

years earlier in Cairo, in which he promised to push for democracy and human rights in the Arab and Muslim worlds, according to officials involved in the discussions.

But in some ways, they were looking for the world as Obama wanted it to be when he swept into power promising a vision for transformational foreign policy. The secretary of state was of a like mind with a group of foreign policy traditionalists in the administration -- Gates, Donilon and Vice President Joe Biden - - who were more sanguine about the situation the U.S. faced, both in Egypt and in the region, the officials said.

Discussions within the Egyptian government about Mubarak stepping down were slowly bearing fruit, but Clinton felt that U.S. calls for his ouster would make the idea harder for the Egyptian army to embrace and more unlikely for Mubarak to accept, according to administration officials. She believed the louder the U.S. screamed, the more it would reflect the absence of American power in producing results for the Egyptian people.

She had also spent the week on the phone mollifying Arab allies who felt Obama was throwing Mubarak under the bus, which they saw as unseemly for a U.S. ally of 30 years and casting doubt about American loyalties.

And countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Israel worried that an Egypt without Mubarak would destabilize the region by emboldening Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood.

Even as she was pushing the Egyptian prime minister and foreign minister in multiple phone calls for specifics on how the government was going to meet the demands of the protesters, Clinton was concerned about the risks of rushing a "transition" of power, officials said. At a security conference in Munich, Germany, the weekend before Mubarak stepped down, Clinton sought to emphasize the "orderly" aspects of the transition, warning that free and fair elections leading to true democracy in Egypt would take time, care and sophisticated planning that could be complicated by a hasty exit by Mubarak, given the country's lack of a political culture.

Last Thursday, Mubarak surprised the world when he did not step down during a blunt address to the Egyptian people.

Obama responded with tough remarks of his own. While he went further than he had previously in urging Mubarak to begin a meaningful transition, he ultimately resisted urgings of White House aides to call outright for Mubarak to resign.

The next day, feeling the pressure from the nearly three-week protest and calls for change from Western allies, Mubarak handed power over to the military.

"Hillary Clinton brought much-needed good balance and judgment to counter some of the starry-eyed dreamers surrounding the president, who tend to reinforce his worst instincts about how fast any given situation can change," said Aaron David Miller, a Mideast negotiator for six secretaries of state and author of "The Much Too Promised Land," about the history of failed U.S. efforts in the Mideast peace process.

"The Egyptian public was driving the freedom express. Clinton understood the approach on Mubarak had to be evolutionary, not revolutionary, and the administration ended up playing a tough hand pretty well."

The last few weeks have illustrated the complexities of diplomatic sausage-making inside the U.S. government, but since taking office, Clinton has kept her head down, proving herself to be a team player and tireless defender of the administration. She has been deferential to Obama in both public and private, never suggesting in any way she had an agenda other than his.

"It's amazing that when she became secretary, every reporter in Washington was waiting for one inch of daylight (between her and Obama). That one inch of daylight would become one mile of daylight, which would then become a chasm of daylight," said Sandy Berger, former national security adviser in the Clinton administration and a close friend and adviser of Hillary Clinton's. "The fact there is no distance between them, in a town where division and conflict is the name of the game, I think is an enormous tribute to her."

An 'aha' moment in Copenhagen

Obama has also found in Clinton a sympathetic view of the changing nature of the world and the need to update America's posture to shape it. The two shared that kind of an "aha" moment at the climate change summit meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December 2009, where China and other big developing countries were balking at a deal mandating reduced emissions.

"We were struck in Copenhagen how much countries were taking their lead from China within the developing world," Rhodes said. "They had a conversation about how we have got to get in the game here. We've been so focused on a narrow set of issues that we have ceded a lot of ground."

That realization, reflected in Obama's first National Security Strategy, gave rise to increased outreach by Clinton with rising powers across the globe ranging from Brazil to Turkey and Indonesia to India, in an effort to restore American leadership after two wars, eight years of the Bush administration, and a global financial crisis that many around the world say was ignited by financial woes in the United States.

With China, Clinton designed an approach that sought to engage Beijing's cooperation on an ever-widening menu of issues, while at the same time countering China's military rise by strengthening ties with India and other countries in Southeast Asia.

"What I think we don't recognize as much is that the Chinese value a tough interlocutor," Campbell said. "If you are easy or too solicitous, the Chinese in fact don't respect you so much. And the fact that the secretary is so clear and tough and so committed to American positions and interests, I think the Chinese actually respect that."

Clinton often taps into the political savvy that at one point had everyone assuming she, not Obama, would be the Democratic nominee for president in 2008. For the past two years she has put those skills to work, using her unmatched star power to campaign as tirelessly for America as she did for the job she lost to her current boss.

From speaking plainly to skeptical Pakistani youth at a "townterview" -- Oprah-style town hall meetings, which Clinton holds regularly to field questions from audiences -- to visiting rape victims in Congo, Clinton has drawn upon her personal experience to present a more human side of foreign policy.

She has also drawn on her experience to identify with the political concerns of world leaders.

No country too small to be a partner

"Who better than Hillary Clinton to talk to a leader about what it's like to be criticized in the media?" said Phil Gordon, assistant secretary for European affairs. "Especially leaders in some of our less advanced democracies will say, 'I have to crack down on the media because they criticize me all the time.' And this secretary of state can say, 'Mr. President, I know what that is like. I have been through it more than you, but it is just part of our democratic system.' And she can communicate that in a way that is unique at least in the American political scene."

For Clinton, no country is too small to partner with the United States. Even as she managed a reset with Russia, expanded ties with China, and deepened relationships with traditional U.S. allies in Europe, she also traveled to the tiny Pacific island of Papua New Guinea, which has massive undeveloped fields of petroleum and natural gas.

"These capital investments helped us deal with what was the biggest problem that we came in facing -- the idea that there was an American decline," said Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg. "That our credibility and leadership were shot, either because we were too unilateral or we weren't dealing with what we needed to deal with. That narrative is beginning to fade."

While acknowledging Clinton's considerable efforts to restore America's image, some critics have charged she has done little to consolidate these gains into advancing major foreign policy issues.

Advisers argue the long-term "capital investments" Clinton has made in restoring partnerships with key countries, like China and Russia, have produced strategic cooperation on issues like Iran and North Korea. But critics question whether she can bring home a foreign policy success on those issues.

Her deputy concedes that the pressure is on to turn diplomacy into tangible results.

"It couldn't be done if we didn't invest in the relationships right," Steinberg said. "But now we've got to convert that. So a big focus in the next two years will be, 'OK, we've created the right context for making substantive progress on Iran and North Korea, but we need to move forward on those agendas.' "

'Smart power'

In some ways, Clinton has sought to redefine American foreign policy by giving diplomacy and development equal weight to defense, a concept she calls "smart power."

Smart power means focusing on a package of national security challenges that don't fit easily into classic foreign policy boxes -- like women's empowerment, human trafficking, poverty, disease, internet freedom and climate change. These challenges, Clinton has argued, will do more to shape the 21st century than conflicts between states.

To meet them, Clinton has adopted an ideology she espoused in her book "It Takes a Village," in which she argues it takes all aspects of society to raise a child. As secretary she argued that civil societies, and women in particular, have an important role to play in solving modern challenges and expanding economic and political opportunity for ordinary people.

On the road, she works herself, and her staff, to the point of exhaustion spreading her gospel. Even after dinners with presidents and ministers, there is always another town hall to speak at or another women's group to engage.

Some argue that while the goals Clinton espouses, like internet freedom and human rights, are admirable, they have not been translated into policy involving real world relations between the United States and other countries

"Secretary Clinton says one of her absolutely key goals is internet freedom. Great, but what country has been penalized in its relationship with us for preventing internet freedom? If there is no penalty, you are just making nice speeches," Abrams said.

Clinton has won high marks for securing more resources for the State Department and USAID -- both gutted during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan -- which was also critical to the smart power effort.

She gained significant budget increases for both 2010 and 2011, even as other agencies faced cuts. In December she rolled out the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, modeled after a Pentagon policy evaluation process she learned about during her time on the Armed Services Committee:

The exercise updated both the mandate and the skill set of the Foreign Service and USAID to reflect more of the development priorities she cared about. Future diplomats, she said, will be "people who wear cargo pants as much as striped pants."

Clinton has also taken an unprecedented interest in the management of the State Department itself, even down to installing showers for employees who bike to work -- a suggestion she culled from the "Secretary's Sounding Board" that she set up on the department's internal website.

It's not uncommon for Clinton to pop down to the cafeteria or walk into a suite of offices and stop at people's desks. She regularly records video messages to the employees wishing them a happy new year or a happy Mother's Day. It's all part of an effort to make people feel part of the team.

'These are her troops'

Clinton has also been credited with tapping into the vast expertise of the Foreign Service and civil service. Before she arrived, diplomats at State were worried that her political aides in what was commonly referred to as "Hillaryland" would freeze out the Foreign Service and run the building from the seventh floor suite of offices that house the secretary and her personal staff.

"She is smart. She knew that wouldn't be welcomed," Steinberg said. "She has used the building well."

Every Monday, Clinton meets with several dozen top managers from USAID and State and all of the special envoys, scanning the room for input. Clinton is always looking for the big idea, and it doesn't matter to her whether it's an assistant secretary or a junior desk officer who offers it.

Before Steven Mull became the State Department's executive secretary, he worked on Iran issues for Undersecretary Bill Burns, one of the top officials at the State Department.

"Usually at meetings with leaders, they each deliver their points and everyone else listens," Mull said. "In some of my meetings with her on Iran, she would say, 'Steve, why don't you tell the minister what you were telling me?' You have to be on your game and be well-informed. No secretary of state has ever turned to me to address the princes or the foreign ministers and offer my views. It's an intimidating, but an incredibly empowering and enriching experience."

Clinton also was the first agency head to provide benefits for same-sex partners of employees, using the prerogatives at her disposal. The move put pressure on the White House to extend similar benefits throughout the administration.

"These are her troops," said Deputy Assistant Secretary Philippe Reines, a long-time close adviser. "She wants to take care of them. She wants them to be the best equipped to do their jobs and she knows what they are doing is not easy. She knows how many have died on her watch."

Losing Holbrooke

None of Clinton's troops was closer to her than Holbrooke, who was all but certain to be nominated as secretary of state had she won the presidency.

On the night Holbrooke died, Clinton held court with two dozen of his staff, family and friends assembled at the hospital.

While it was "very clear that she was grieving," said Derek Choellet, former deputy director of policy planning, who has since moved to the White House, Clinton "had clearly decided we were going to push forward. It wasn't a matter of, 'We are going to push forward and put this in the past.' It was, 'I could add to this by being mournful and bring it down, but I'm going to hold this thing together and bring these people with me,' and that is what she did that night in a real human way.

"It was just a genuinely human moment which showed what an incredible person she is. She stepped up in such a big way. It wasn't just about empathy or being a good person. She was being a leader and it showed."

Campbell said that personal interest is why people are loyal to her.

"None of that stuff ever makes it out in the press about her -- just the toughness and the polish," Campbell said.

There has been no shortage of foreign policy experts during the past two years lamenting that Clinton's attention to the futuristic trends of soft power has come at the expense of taking a high-profile role. Questions continue about whether she is trapped by her deference to the White House.

"The foreign policy plate is very full and the 'defining challenges' for the White House these past two years have not been these nontraditional threats, but rather Iran, Iraq, the Afghanistan War, the Israel-Palestine standoff," said Steve Clemons, director of the American Strategy Program and author of the foreign policy blog The Washington Note. "For the most part, Clinton's impact on these issues has been minor -- in part because she decided to be the chief validator of Obama, not allowing any distance between his articulated views and hers and keeping her political powder dry, and because she had not developed a real vision yet of what she wanted to pursue."

Comparisons to Kissinger

Others have wondered aloud whether Clinton has the strategic vision and negotiator's mindset of accomplished predecessors like Henry Kissinger or James Baker -- or whether perhaps she is afraid to try and fail, which could sully her image in a post-State Department world.

"She obviously has tremendous political influence, but beneath this mask of confidence and superstardom could be a fundamental uncertainty about whether or not, if put into these situations, she can actually deliver," Miller said.

Clinton aides say she has resisted the model of previous secretaries of state who have been closely identified with one issue. In today's cruel and unforgiving world, they argue, Clinton doesn't have the luxury of focusing on one pressing foreign policy problem at the expense of the others.

To be sure, Obama has exhibited a strong desire to play a role in formulation and execution of American foreign policy, keeping decision-making on major issues like Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East peace process at the White House.

"We had to make a series of decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan that go to the heart of the direction this country is going, our posture in the world," the White House's Rhodes explains. "These are decisions that necessitated a strong foreign policy engagement. Much of this came from the campaign. We came to office knowing what we were going to do. The combination of these front-burner issues, chiefly two wars, and a very developed agenda certainly led to a large presidential imprint."

Still, Rhodes insists, Clinton's role as the nation's chief diplomat is not "simply one of implementation." The White House gives her high marks for improving relations with Pakistan, helping to negotiate the START treaty with Russia, and deepening U.S. engagement in Asia.

"On the issues that she has been engaged in, she is very much driving and shaping the outcomes," Rhodes said.

A juggling act

If the first six weeks of 2011 are any indicator, Clinton will be doing a lot more juggling, as a long list of foreign policy issues becomes the province of the State Department. In addition to moving forward with engaging North Korea in the coming months, Clinton will also need to work closely with allies about increasing pressure on Iran over its nuclear program.

Progress in creating a credible Afghan government and sustainable economy has also been an uphill battle, with Karzai an unreliable partner. It will largely fall to Clinton to advance the strategy that she and Holbrooke envisioned, marrying the fragile and reversible military gains with a political process that includes international diplomacy, regional involvement, and political reconciliation among the Taliban and other militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the coming weeks Clinton will have to defend her smart power efforts before Republicans in Congress intent on taking an ax to President Obama's budget, particularly when it comes to foreign aid.

And down the road, she and the State Department will assume full responsibility for U.S. involvement in Iraq, when the remainder of U.S. troops come home at the end of the year.

Rolling up her sleeves

Yet no issue will likely demand more of Clinton's time in the near future than the political upheaval in Egypt, which has quickly become the first major foreign policy crisis for the Obama administration.

While Mubarak has left the political scene, the chapter on Egypt's march toward democracy is far from complete. In fact, for Clinton, it is really the beginning.

Since Mubarak stepped down, Clinton is said to have been in a "war-room mentality," talking to European and Arab allies about how the U.S. can nurture and facilitate a military-led transition.

It's a personal challenge that speaks to the dilemma she has faced since becoming secretary of state. On one hand, she wants to stay true to the themes of political, economic and social reforms and respect for human rights that she pressed for in Qatar, yearnings which were ignited in Tunisia, spread like wildfire to Cairo and which are now permeating throughout the region -- issues which remain close to her heart.

"She respects what the people had to do to go out in (Tahrir Square)," Mills said. "She feels the overwhelming weight of it."

But Clinton knows the push for democracy is fraught with risk. She is mindful of regional stability and wants to reassure other Middle East governments that the U.S. will not abandon important and longtime allies.

And she must save the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks from becoming a permanent casualty of recent events. That will take time as well as diplomatic dexterity.

"The secretary is going to roll up her sleeves," said Jake Sullivan, director of policy planning and deputy chief of staff. "She sees this as one of the most significant strategic projects of the Obama presidency, and she would like to support the president in advancing American values, interests and security in a region that is going through real transformation."

For the first two years, Clinton has "set the table," in the words of several advisers. She has rebuilt the critical partnerships abroad and rallied her troops at home. In 2011 she must cash in these investments to navigate a world which she wants America to lead, but whose problems are not easily solved.