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Steven Clemons

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Report

Original citation:

Clemons, Steven (2010) *Obama nation?: US foreign policy one year on: Obama fails to reverse gravity: America continues to decline*. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR003. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43590/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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Obama Fails to Reverse Gravity: America Continues to Decline

Steve Clemons directs the American Strategy Program at the New America Foundation and publishes the popular political blog, The Washington Note.

Taking stock of President Barack Obama's relative progress or failure after a year in office cannot easily be measured in the behavior of American foes as those challenging the US tend to be pushing against American interests no matter who is President. But what of allies?

Four strategically significant allies of the United States – Germany, Japan, Israel and Saudi Arabia – have each been saying “no” to Obama's White House. Each has rebuffed the new President on key Obama policy asks without consequence – this itself illustrating the severe decline in global American power.

The United States and its new President presume that they sit at the head of the global power table, but increasingly, the world sees a formerly great nation that has fallen, that has traded substantive power for pretense, and which is seen as increasingly impotent for not realizing that it must re-earn its leadership rather than asserting illusions.

ASSERTIVE ALLIES

At the London G-20 economic summit while the global economy tilted towards collapse, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's and Barack Obama's polite but serious debate about fiscal expansionary policies vs. fiscal conservatism during the crisis became the distinctive memory of that Summit – overshadowing the swirling efforts of UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nikolas Sarkozy to steal the show. Merkel rebuffed Obama's economic leadership and views, and Obama, swallowing pride, maintained an image of cordiality and friendship with Merkel despite her refusing to budge.

Japan, which like Germany was defeated by the US and then was stood up and rebuilt via American patronage and stewardship, has undergone significant political change with the Democratic Party of Japan's defeat of the long-time ruling Liberal Democratic Party. For years, the United States has acted as if the basic “do what we say” dynamic towards Japan would never be challenged despite a clear domestic struggle over what Japan's emergent national identity should become, over what a healthy nationalism should look like, and how Japan should reposition itself given a fifty year security alliance with the US and the complicating emergence of China.

Japan's Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is apparently trying to demonstrate that America is trailing history rather than leading it, with the US defensively trying to protect a Futenma Air Station base-swapping arrangement made between the environmentally-insensitive and corruption-blind LDP

and George W. Bush's administration. Hatoyama promised during his campaign that the basing deal would not go through, and despite some bludgeoning of Japan's Washington Ambassador by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the issue – and direct pressure from Obama on Prime Minister – Hatoyama has refused to walk the course the United States has been pushing, despite threats that Japan failing to yield might undermine core tenets of the relationship.

Ultimately, the US obsession with the Futenma arrangement shows weakness rather than strength because given China's rise, the US needs Japan's economic and military resources as a full partner, not in ambivalence. The US would be undermining its own security to trade the broad strengths of the US-Japan security relationship with the relatively minor issue of moving the controversial Futenma Air Station – which many don't remember was the very first "deal" done by then-US Ambassador to Japan Walter Mondale and then-Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto in the aftermath of the rape of a 12-year old Japanese girl by three American military servicemen. The deal then was to absorb Futenma into the huge American air base on Okinawa and combine the Air Force and Marine operations within the enormous base land mass already under US control. Ultimately, inter-service rivalry on the American side undermined this keystone of agreement on a number of security revisions in the relationship. Obama and Clinton have shown little historic understanding of the roots of the Futenma problem – but beyond that have rattled sabers in such a way that shows the Obama team is threatening something it can't afford to lose, thus further enhancing the political benefits to Hatoyama of seeming to resist American pressure.

Saudi Arabia is not often acknowledged publicly in Washington as an ally – but in many ways for decades, the Saudis have been America's most significant strategic ally in the Middle East, moving oil production and supply in patterns that helped America's strategic interests and partners. Most recently, the Saudis used their influence on Pakistan in providing subsidized oil to that state to help move

Pakistan to take bolder actions against al Qaeda and Pakistan Taliban groups in the SWAT region. When George W. Bush was running for President, his father arranged for then-Saudi Ambassador to the US Prince Bandar al-Sultan to give secret foreign policy tutorials on the candidate's campaign airplane. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US was allied with the Saudis in arming and equipping the Mujahadeen, many of whose leaders then are US enemies today.

But recently when asked by President Obama to put forward a number of key concessions toward Israel as part of the "opener" in changing the dynamics of Middle East-Israeli antagonism, Saudi Arabia King Abdullah refused. The King had already initiated and resurrected several times a normalization proposal between the Arab League and Israel first offered in Beirut in 2002 – only to see it largely ignored and used occasionally and symbolically by the US administration at moments of political expediency. The King warned President Obama that Israel's new Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, would ultimately embarrass the President and embarrass those who put too much into the ante too soon in restarting the Middle East peace process. Not only did the Saudis rebuff Obama, they proved to be correct – identifying early on that the Obama White House didn't realize that America's superpower status had been punctured badly during the Bush years and that before states would throw their lots solidly behind American leadership, the White House would have to prove that it had power to reshape and sculpt global relationships. Being told to trust responsible behavior by Israel was not a convincing first move by the Obama team toward the Saudis.

Finally, Israel itself said "no" to the United States and Barack Obama in the loudest and most politically consequential way. Largely a client state of the United States, overwhelmingly dependent on US aid and transfer payments as well as an iron-clad security guarantee, Israel's schizophrenic approach to Palestine and a two-state solution has been one of many frustrating realities of the Middle East peace

process. Prime Minister Olmert's government repeatedly and passionately stated that Israel's only chance at survival as a Jewish state and democracy was to make a two state solution work. Prime Minister Netanyahu's government is highly ambivalent at best about the position of the previous government and has done much to undermine any progress in negotiations with the Palestinians.

In order to kick-start the peace process in the wake of the Gaza conflict, Barack Obama selected the distinguished peace-forger and former US Senator George Mitchell to take on the task as envoy. To convince the Arab world it was serious the Obama White House committed itself to pressure Israel to halt all new settlement activity as Israel's ante in the process. This raised hopes in the Arab world that Obama was serious – but raised hackles inside Israel that the US President would ultimately sell out Israel's equities and basic security.

Netanyahu demonstrated his statecraft skills in a high stakes but successful gamble in knocking back Barack Obama. The Prime Minister rebuffed decisively the notion that settlements could be the portal through which Middle East peace talks could be restarted. Consequently, the Obama White House – which often internally compares itself to a hybrid of the Lincoln and Kennedy administrations – found that Netanyahu had become what Khrushchev had been to Kennedy. Netanyahu, an ally, had shown the limits of Barack Obama's power to resculpt Middle East realities – at least so far until there is some escalating political crisis between Israel and the US in which the American President reclaims the heavyweight champion ring from Netanyahu.

Each of these episodes have their distinctive political circumstances and ought to be grouped together only cautiously, but the fact remains that America's allies are rebuffing the US more regularly and overtly than would have been imagined a decade ago. Global analysts often refer to the troubling behavior of problematic nations like Iran or North Korea or non-allies like China and Russia as measures of America's current weak position, but it is in the decisions of allies that the absence of what had been long-established equilibriums becomes clear and worrisome.

Despite the global fascination with Barack Obama and his inspiring oratorical sketches of what the world could expect of itself and what nations could collectively do to meet the enormous challenges ahead, the world at the same time doubts America's ability to achieve the objectives it sets out for itself.

The world sees the US unrealistically threaten Japan with strategic rupture over a minor basing issue on Okinawa where the United States actually maintains 39 separate military installations. It sees the US try to convince the Arab world that it is serious about Israel-Palestine peace by promising a settlement freeze and then reversing itself and acquiescing to Israel's recalcitrant Prime Minister. It sees the long-term, back room managed US-Saudi

relationship contribute nothing to Obama's script for Middle East peacemaking. It sees Barack Obama politely humbled and rebuffed by Germany, a global capital surplus nation, at the London G-20 meeting when Germany's own growth and welfare are tied in part to reflating the US economy which consumes German exports.

A PROGRESSIVE REALIST PATH

America's current national security objectives are greater than its means – and the White House is demonstrating that it can't juggle all of these challenges simultaneously. American power and leverage are being dissipated in too many failed causes. It's time to rethink America's national security course and to re-prioritize its core goals. The key to rebuilding American power is accomplishing something real that the US said it would do – to gain momentum from small success followed by a next success.

Recognizing the constraints today on American power, Obama nonetheless can reinvent America's position by scoring well-thought-out wins by defying conventional wisdom and not giving in to countervailing forces. Restarting a credible Russia-US effort in reducing WMDs and nuclear materials, which the Obama team may pull off, may be one such positive gain. Pushing through normalization of relations between Syria and Israel comes to mind. Ending the restrictions on American citizen travel to Cuba and finally ending an anachronistic Cold War 90 miles of US shores would also buy Obama some global credits.

The key is for the White House to overcome the structural collapse of American power during the Bush years by convincing allies through its prudent actions that America is worth backing again and following. Renewed and refocused momentum in the US foreign policy agenda may convince foes that America's considerable assets would be more shrewdly used to help lead the world into a new, more stable and reorganized equilibrium.

Only this kind of progressive realist path will secure a positive foreign policy legacy for President Barack Obama and assure that the US re-earns its way back to global leadership from its current position as an anachronistic, reactive power falling behind events rather than leading them. ■