

US opinion turns against the globalism of its President

BRUCE STOKES

PRESIDENT Barack Obama is pursuing an internationalist agenda. He has escalated America's military commitment in Afghanistan. He supports a global climate change treaty. He has promised to revamp US immigration policy. And he backs continued American integration with the world economy.

On each of these issues, the White House is at odds with the views of many Americans, as shown by opinion polls. And, in some cases, such policy is even at cross purposes with the views of members of the president's own Democratic Party.

This dissonance between American attitudes and US government policy raises questions about the sustainability of the Obama administration's international initiatives and threatens to undermine the reservoir of good will for the United States that was generated by Obama's election just one year ago.

Candidate Obama rejected Bush era unilateralism and promised a new American engagement with the world. As president, he reached out to the Europeans, seeking to work with them on Afghanistan and Iran. He chose a non-confrontational approach with China, North Korea and Russia. He pleased Southeast Asian nations by changing course on Burma, long shunned by Washington. And he embraced the creation of the G22 as the new global economic steering committee, replacing the G8 that long only represented the interests of the world's richest nations.

But opinion polls show the American people are moving in another direction. Reeling from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression and convinced that the world is an increasingly dangerous place, Americans despair about their country's future leadership role in the world. They have turned inward and once again become defiantly self-assertive.

Americans are now more isolationist and more unilateralist than at any time in recent history. For the first time in more than four decades of polling, a plurality of Americans now says that the US should "mind its own business internationally" and let other countries get along the best they can on their own, according to the recent America's Place in the World survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. This isolationist sentiment surpasses that at the end of the Vietnam War. Complicating matters further for a Democratic administration, a majority of the president's own party now holds isolationist attitudes.

In addition, more than four-in-five of those surveyed think the US should go its own way on the international stage, not worrying too much about whether other countries agree or not. That is by far the greatest degree of unilateralist sentiment since the question was first asked in 1964.

This unprecedented isolationism and support for unilateralism runs at cross purposes to Obama's avowed goal of international engagement. The president talks the talk of internationalism, but he has yet to convince the American public to walk that talk. In fact, some would argue that he sought to please the labor unions by imposing tariffs on some Chinese imports while pledging to uphold free trade. Nowhere is this friction between US foreign policy objectives and American attitudes more evident than with regard to Afghanistan. Only one-in-three Americans backed president Obama's troop surge, before his announcement, including just one-in-five Democrats.

If American casualties mount in the months ahead, as they undoubtedly will, if there is new evidence of the Afghan government's corruption or ineffectiveness and if the US is drawn even deeper into Pakistan to fight the Taliban, the Obama administration has no reservoir of public good will to draw upon to ride out the storms that are bound to rise. Maintaining the military initiative could then prove difficult, especially as public dissatisfaction makes Congress restive in the run up to the 2010 election.

Isolationism and unilateralism may also complicate future US defense relations with Japan. The new government in Tokyo has called into question American military bases on Okinawa and has expressed a desire for closer ties with other Asian nations, effectively beginning to distance itself somewhat from Washington. Such actions could spark resentment among Americans who are already turning their backs on the world. And, with the Obama administration focusing most of its Asian energies on China, the US-Japan alliance, the bulwark of Asian security for the last two generations, could erode out of neglect and disinterest on both sides.

Americans' unilateralist impulses similarly threaten to derail Obama's delicate handling of Iran. The White House is slowly ratcheting up international pressure on Tehran in an effort to get it to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. But six-in-ten Americans support a military strike against Iran if it is certain Tehran has produced a nuclear weapon. Resisting that public pressure may become ever more difficult if the Iranian government continues to flaunt the United Nations on this issue.

Despite president Obama's promise to reverse Bush administration foot dragging on climate change, curbing carbon emissions lacks public support in the US. Less than half the American public sees climate change as a major threat, raising doubts about whether Congress will ever approve pending legislation to curb carbon emissions.

American obstructionism on climate change in the early part of this decade fueled a worldwide rise in anti-Americanism even before the Iraq war. If the US is again seen as the roadblock to an international agreement, Obama's good intentions may not be enough to stem a revival of anti-American sentiment.

Similarly, president Obama garnered global kudos for his denunciation of the Bush administration's treatment of suspected Islamic terrorists and his decision to close the Guantanamo Bay



PHOTO: AFP

detention facility. But half of the American public disapproves of the president's decision to close Guantanamo. And over half believe that the use of torture against suspected terrorists is justified. With the Guantanamo closing now delayed and the American public's willingness to abuse human rights in terrorist cases, America's stature could again suffer.

Immigration poses yet another issue where Americans' attitudes clash with Obama intentions. The US prides itself on its immigrant heritage. And president Obama has promised immigration reform next year that will create a path to citizenship for people now in the country illegally. But only a minority of the American population supports legalization for illegal immigrants, according to a survey by the German

Marshall Fund. And stronger border controls continue to be Americans' preferred option for reducing illegal immigration. Such attitudes are certainly not new and are widely shared in other countries, but they further tarnish America's reputation.

Finally, Obama trade policy and Americans' attitudes on trade are a paradox. The economic downturn coupled with rising isolationism would seem to be a recipe for growing US protectionism. And, in fact, other nations charge that through Buy America procurement actions and its failure to finalize multiple trade agreements, Washington has turned protectionist. But surveys by Pew, the German Marshall Fund and others demonstrate that the American people especially Democrats are less protectionist today than in

the recent past. Yet the Obama administration has failed to articulate a coherent trade liberalization strategy, forgoing an opportunity to pursue at least one internationalist policy that might resonate with the American public.

President Obama is an articulate proponent of US engagement with the world. But he has failed to convince the American public. This dissonance between policy and public opinion threatens to thwart White House objectives and undermine America's stature abroad.

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Are the Taliban and Al-Qaeda poles apart?

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THE most notorious Islamic militants are ordinarily grouped under two heads: Taliban and Al-Qaeda network. However, there is another group emerging - Salafism - that advocates restoring a Muslim empire across the Middle East and Spain. Salafis have sought inroads in Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon and Jordan.

Many people are confused about the objectives of Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Some think the objectives are similar and some believe they are not. Deeper analysis shows that Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan have different objectives than those of Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda promotes holy war to translate its conservative religious ideologies globally; the objectives of Taliban are confined to changing the regimes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in that sense they are local.

Two embattled governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan confront the Taliban without success. The US came to Afghanistan in 2001 to remove the Taliban government which supported the Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden living in Afghanistan. The US fears that if Afghan Taliban regain control over Afghanistan, it may invite Al-Qaeda back in the country.

Understanding the differences between the two Taliban is also necessary. When Pakistan

army launched an offensive against Taliban in Pakistan, many in the US administration thought incorrectly that the assault was against the Afghan Taliban, against whom the NATO forces, including the US military, are fighting.

Although both groups threaten American interests, the Afghan Taliban is the primary enemy of the US. On 25th December, the Taliban released a video showing an American soldier who was captured five months ago in Afghanistan. Private Bowe Bergdahl, an infantryman, was taken by the Taliban in Paktika Province on June 30th. The Taliban demands for a number of prisoners to be exchanged for Bergdahl.

The recent attacks of the Pakistani Taliban on military and police establishments have strained relations with Afghan Taliban because their hiding place in the Tribal areas in Pakistan is under attack from Pakistan army. They do not approve the way Pakistani Taliban are fighting with the Pakistan government and causing a lot of problems for Afghan Taliban.

The Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are present in the tribal areas on both sides of the Durand Line and the tribal areas have always been autonomous. Anxious to safeguard this autonomy, the tribes resist control by the central government.

The Afghan Taliban is by far the older of the two Taliban, led by Mullah Omar since it was

formed in 1994 (believed to be formed under the guidance of Pakistan intelligence agency). It may be described as a genuine national movement incorporating not only a broad network of fighters but also a shadow government-in-waiting. It seeks to regain power it held over most of Afghanistan before being removed by the US invasion after 9/11.

The Pakistani Taliban is a looser coalition united mainly by enmity toward the government in Islamabad. It emerged formally in 2007 as a separate force led by Baitullah Mehsud under the name of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Students' Movement of Pakistan). After the death of Baitullah Mehsud, Hakimullah Mehsud took over as head of Pakistani Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan.

Another confusion that has arisen over the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban is that Afghan Taliban have been directing their forces from Pakistan and their leaders are believed to be residing in the border areas of Pakistan. Mollah Omar and his senior colleagues are understood to be in or around the city of Quetta in Baluchistan.

The US-backed Karzai government in Kabul has a tenuous hold on power. The insurgency has spread in many parts of the country, including Kabul itself. The military situation for the US and NATO is worse today than it has been in

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2001. At the same time, neighbouring Pakistan has been destabilized. President Asif Ali Zardari, like his predecessor Pervez Musharraf, has to face a public which has become fervently anti-American. To the majority of people in Pakistan, India poses a threat greater than that of the Taliban. Furthermore, the fact that the US has so far failed to persuade India to restart talks with Pakistan and it has been doing little to curb what Pakistan perceives as the undue influence of India in Afghanistan has been unsettling for Pakistan.

Pakistan is expected to hang on to the "Kashmiri freedom fighters" that it has reportedly used as proxies in the Indian-administered Kashmir. Pakistan possesses 75 to 100 nuclear weapons. The deepest concern for the west is: what would happen with the nuclear weapons in the case of total regime collapse? Will they fall under the hand and control of the Taliban?

Lately Pakistan is fighting back the Taliban in South Waziristan. It is reported that the army has deployed some 28,000 troops to take on an estimated 10,000 militants including up to 1,500 foreign fighters.

As for Afghanistan, many observers suggest there is an urgent need to the establishment of a mechanism consisting of the six countries with contiguous borders with Afghanistan plus the US, Russia and Britain. Such a mechanism will facilitate precision targeting of terrorist groups and minimizing collateral damage. This has to be accompanied by a concerted effort to win hearts and minds through mega-doses of economic assistance.

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NEWS BRIEFS

India, Japan strengthen strategic relations

India and Japan will upgrade their defence and strategic ties through a Defence Action Plan (DAP) that will be presented to the prime ministers of both countries, said Mahindra Singh, retired Indian Army major general and defence analyst based here. The heavy dependence of Japan and India on oil imports from the Persian Gulf is another major driver behind the growing Indo-Japanese relationship, Singh said.

In November, Indian Defence Minister A. K. Antony accompanied a high-level delegation to Tokyo that included Defence Secretary Pradeep Kumar; V.K. Saraswat, scientific adviser to the defence minister; and Vice Adm. D.K. Dewan, the vice chief of the Naval Staff.

Source: www.defenseneews.com

Putin: Russia must develop 'offensive' weapons

Russia must develop new offensive weapons systems to counter US missile defences and prevent Americans from feeling they can "do whatever they want," Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said on December 29.

A US plan to create a mobile missile shield means Russia must develop new offensive weapons. "To preserve the balance, we must develop offensive weapons systems, not missiles defence systems as the United States is doing," Putin was quoted by state news agencies as saying while on a working visit to Russia's far east region.

"The problems of missile defence and offensive arms are very closely linked," Putin said, according to ITAR-TASS. "By building such an umbrella over themselves, our partners could feel themselves fully secure and will do whatever they want, which upsets the balance and aggressiveness immediately increases in real politics and economics."

In September, President Barack Obama announced the United States would drop plans pushed by his predecessor, George W. Bush, but fiercely opposed by Moscow to deploy parts of its new missile shield in former Soviet bloc states Poland and the Czech Republic.

Obama, however, made clear Washington would continue to develop new ballistic missile defences in other ways and locations. Initially, Russia cautiously welcomed the shift but said the configuration would require further study and information from the United States.

Putin's comments, coming on the heels of a similar statement by President Dmitry Medvedev, marked a toughening of Moscow's stance on strategic security relations with the United States.

"Let the Americans hand over all their information on missile defence, and we are ready to hand over all the information on offensive weapons systems," Putin said.

Putin's remarks also come as the former Cold War foes remain in negotiations to replace the expired START nuclear disarmament treaty, which sets limits on both sides' nuclear arsenals. START expired on December 5.

Source: www.defenseneews.com



PHOTO: AFP