

The elections, gridlock and foreign policy

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BARACK Obama remains president. The Democrats remain in control of the Senate with a non-filibuster-proof majority. The Republicans remain in control of the House of Representatives.

The national political dynamic has resulted in an extended immobilization of the government. With the House body where party discipline is the norm under Republican control, passing legislation will be difficult and require compromise. Since the Senate is in Democratic hands, the probability of it overriding any unilateral administrative actions is small. Nevertheless, Obama does not have enough congressional support for dramatic new initiatives, and getting appointments through the Senate that Republicans oppose will be difficult.

There is a quote often attributed to Thomas Jefferson: "That government is best which governs the least because its people discipline themselves." I am not sure that the current political climate is what was meant by the people disciplining themselves, but it is clear that the people have imposed profound limits on this government. Its ability to continue what is already being done has not been curbed, but its ability to do much that is new has been blocked.

The plan for American power

The gridlock sets the stage for a shift in foreign policy that has been under way since the U.S.-led intervention in Libya in 2011. I have argued that presidents do not make strategies but that those strategies are imposed on them by reality. Nevertheless, it is always helpful when the subjective wishes of a president and necessity coincide, even if the intent is not the same.

In previous articles and books, I have made the case that the United States emerged as the only global power in 1991, when the Soviet Union fell. It emerged unprepared for its role and uncertain about how to execute it. The exercise of power requires skill and experience, and the United States had no plan for how to operate in a world where it was not faced with a rival. It had global interests but no global strategy.

This period began in 1991 and is now in the process of ending. The first phase consisted of a happy but illusory period in which it was believed that there were no serious threats to the United States. This was replaced on 9/11 with a phase of urgent reaction, followed by the belief that the only interest the United States had was prosecuting a war against radical Islamists.

Both phases were part of a process of fantasy. American power, simply by its existence, was a threat and challenge to others, and the world remained filled with danger. On the other hand, focusing on one thing obsessively to the exclusion of all other matters was equally dangerous. American foreign policy was disproportionate, and understandably so. No one was prepared for the power of the United States.

During the last half of the past decade, the inability to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with economic problems, convinced reasonable people that the United States had entered an age of permanent decline. The sort of power the United States has does



not dissipate that fast. The disintegration of European unity and the financial crisis facing China have left the United States, not surprisingly, still the unchallenged global power. The issue is what to do with that power.

The defeated challenger in the U.S. election, Mitt Romney, had a memorable and important turn of phrase when he said that you can't kill your way out of the problems of the Middle East. The point that neither Romney nor Obama articulated is what you do instead in the Middle East elsewhere.

Constant use of military force is not an option. See the example of the British Empire: Military force was used judiciously, but the preferred course was avoiding war in favor of political arrangements or supporting enemies of enemies politically, economically and with military aid. That was followed by advisers and trainers officers for native troops. As a last resort, when the balance could not hold and the issue was of sufficient interest, the British would insert overwhelming force to defeat an enemy. Until, as all empires do, they became exhausted.

The American strategy of the past years of inserting insufficient force to defeat an enemy that could be managed by other means, and whose ability to harm the United States was limited, would not have been the policy of the British Empire. Nor is it a sustainable policy for the United States. When war comes, it must be conducted with overwhelming force that can defeat the enemy conclusively. And war therefore must be rare

because overwhelming force is hard to come by and enemies are not always easy to beat. The constant warfare that has characterized the beginning of this century is strategically unsustainable.

Libya and Syria

In my view, the last gasp of this strategy was Libya. The intervention there was poorly thought out: The consequences of the fall of Moammar Gadhafi were not planned for, and it was never clear why the future of Libya mattered to the United States. The situation in Libya was out of control long before the Sept. 11 attack in Benghazi. It was a case of insufficient force being applied to an uncertain enemy in a war that did not rise to the level of urgency.

The U.S. treatment of Syria is very different. The United States' unwillingness to involve itself directly with main military force, in spite of urgings from various directions, is an instance in which even a potentially important strategic goal—undermining Iranian influence in Syria—could be achieved by depending on regional powers to manage the problem or to live with it as they choose. Having provided what limited aid was required to destabilize the Syrian government, the United States was content to let the local balance of power take its course.

It is not clear whether Obama saw the doctrine I am discussing here certainly didn't see it in Libya, and his Syrian policy might simply have been a reaction to his

miscalculations in Libya. But the subjective intentions of a leader are not as important as the realities he is responding to, however thoughtfully or thoughtlessly. It was clear that the United States could not continue to intervene with insufficient forces to achieve unclear goals in countries it could not subdue.

Nor could the United States withdraw from the world. It produces almost one-quarter of the world's GDP; how could it? The historical answer was not a constant tempo of intervention but a continual threat of intervention, rarely fulfilled, coupled with skillful management of the balance of power in a region. Even better, when available as a course, is to avoid even the threat of intervention or any pretense of management and let most problems be solved by the people affected by them.

This is not so much a policy as a reality. The United States cannot be the global policeman or the global social worker. The United States is responsible for pursuing its own interests at the lowest possible cost. If withdrawal is impossible, avoiding conflicts that do not involve fundamental American interests is a necessity because garrison states exist constantly in a state of war have trouble holding on to power. Knowing when to go to war is an art, the heart of which is knowing when not to go to war.

One of the hardest things for a young empire to master is the principle that, for the most part, there is nothing to be done. That is the phase in which the United States finds itself at the moment. It is coming to terms not so much with the limits of power as the nature of power. Great power derives from the understanding of the difference between those things that matter and those that don't, and from a ruthless indifference to those that don't. It is a hard thing to learn, but history is teaching it to the United States.

The domestic impasse

The gridlock in which this election has put the U.S. government is a suitable frame for this lesson. While Obama might want to launch major initiatives in domestic policy, he can't. At the same time, he seems not to have the appetite for foreign adventures. It is not clear whether this is simply a response to miscalculation or a genuine strategic understanding, but in either case, adopting a more cautious foreign policy will come naturally to him. This will create a framework that begins to institutionalize two lessons: First, it is rarely necessary to go to war, and second, when you do go to war, go with everything you have. Obama will follow the first lesson, and there is time for the second to be learned by others. He will practice the studied indifference that most foreign problems pose to the United States.

There will be a great deal of unhappiness with the second Obama administration overseas. As much as the world condemns the United States when it does something, at least part of the world is usually demanding some action. Obama will disappoint, but it is not Obama. Just as the elections will paralyze him domestically, reality will limit his foreign policy. Immobilism is something the founders would have been comfortable with, both in domestic politics and in foreign policy. The voters have given the republic a government that will give them both.

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Burma: Trouble brewing for China

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FOLLOWING the Burmese government's suspension of a controversial joint-venture hydroelectric dam project with China in the far north of the country, another flashpoint has emerged in relations between the two countries—a massive copper mine at Latpadaung, a mountain near Monywa northwest of Mandalay in Upper Burma.

The Myitsone hydroelectric project, being built to supply power to China, was cancelled in the face of strong local resistance. This time, local residents are protesting against a Chinese company. Wanbao Mining is in a joint venture with the Burmese military's main commercial enterprise, Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings, or UMEH, accused of destroying cultivated fields, polluting nearby water sources and desecrating Buddhist shrines. No less than 7,800 acres of land from 26 surrounding villages were confiscated for the project.

The public outcry could also force China to rethink its often insensitive policies towards smaller countries in the region.

UMEH's involvement is merely as a recipient of fees from Wanbao, a subsidiary of the North Industries Corporation, or Norinco, China's main weapons manufacturer which is also involved in other business activities.

When the agreement between Norinco and the government of Burma was signed 10 June 2010, the Chinese company said on its website that Monywa is "abundant in copper mine resources with excellent mineral quality, which is of great significance to strengthening the strategic reserve of copper resources in our country, and to enhancing the influence of our country in Myanmar (Burma)."

That influence is now on the wane as Burma tries hard to distance itself from China—which for more than two decades has exerted considerable economic, politi-

cal and even military influence over this Southeast Asian country—while improving political relations with the United States, the European Union and Japan. But after last year's suspension of the US\$3.6 billion joint-venture Myitsone dam project in the northern Kachin State, which shocked the Chinese, Burma must tread carefully in dealing with Wanbao Mining. For the country's new leaders, it is a dilemma: They cannot crack down on the movement in Monywa without risking its still tenuous relationship with the West. But a continuing struggle could impact relations with Burma's powerful northern neighbor.

The campaign against the Chinese company is led by two unlikely local heroes: Thwe Thwe Win, 29, and Aye Net, 34. Neither of the two young women has more than the compulsory five-year primary education behind her, and more than a year ago, both were selling vegetables in the local market in Monywa.

"The Chinese company came and bulldozed our fields and the Chinese officials made rude gestures at us when we came to complain," says Thwe Thwe Win in an interview in Monywa.

The police did nothing, except arrest the two women and some of their comrades. That ignited a mass movement, at a time when freedom of expression is becoming tolerated in Burma after decades of iron-fisted military rule and when anti-Chinese sentiment is rising across the country. Student and labor activists from the old capital Rangoon and elsewhere traveled to Monywa to show support. On 26 October, more than 1,000 local miners, Buddhist monks and members of the general public



defied an order by local authorities restricting access to the mine and marched past roadblocks to make merit at a pagoda inside the mining area.

The two women vow not to give up until the project is scrapped and the Chinese company leaves Monywa.

Elsewhere in Burma, people are also complaining about how China treats their country. For more than 20 years, Chinese companies have stripped large swathes of the north of trees, denuding ecologically crucial watershed areas. Chinese merchants have also flooded Burma with cheap consumer goods and fake medicines, explains a local businessman in Rangoon. "China does produce goods of good quality, but only for export to the West," he said. "Here, they sell only junk.

This is an almost racial attitude towards us."

Even within the ruling military, anti-Chinese feelings run high. Already in 2004, a document was compiled by Lieutenant Colonel Aung Kyaw Hla, a researcher at Burma's Defence Services Academy located in Pyin Oo Lwin, an old hill station in the highlands northeast of Mandalay.

The 346-page top-secret, thesis, titled "A Study of Myanmar [Burma]-U.S. Relations," outlines in Burmese the policies now being implemented to improve relations with Washington and lessen dependence on Beijing. The establishment of a more acceptable regime than the old junta after the November 2010 election has made it easier for the Burmese military to launch new policies and have those taken seriously by the international community.

The thesis bluntly states that having China as a diplomatic ally and economic patron has created a "national emergency" that threatens the country's independence. Aung Kyaw Hla, probably a committee of army strategists rather than a single person, goes on to argue that although human rights are a concern in the West, the US would be willing to modify its policy to suit "strategic interests." Although the author does not specify those interests, the thesis makes it clear that includes common ground with the US vis-à-vis China. The author cites Vietnam and Indonesia under former dictator Suharto as examples of US foreign-policy flexibility in weighing strategic interests against democratization.

If bilateral relations with the US were improved, the master plan suggests, Burma would also gain access to badly needed

funds from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other global financial institutions. The country would then emerge from "regionalism," where it currently depends on the goodwill and trade of immediate neighbors, including China, and "enter a new era of globalization."

At the same time, China is clearly taking the new signals from Burma seriously. In February and March this year, the Beijing-based, Chinese-language weekly Economic Observer ran a series of articles about the suspension of the Myitsone dam trying to analyze what went wrong with China's relations with Burma. "How could something like this happen?" columnist Qin Hul asked. The 14 October Global Times, a daily tabloid published under the auspices of the People's Daily newspaper, said in a commentary that Chinese companies need to "attach more importance to grassroots voices" in carrying out investment projects such as the Monywa copper mine. According to Burmese journalists, reporters from The Global Times are calling them with questions about pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, which never happened before.

It's too early to say whether Myitsone, and now Monywa, will become a turning point in China's relations with Southeast Asia, paving the way for a more tactful relationship with countries such as Burma. But popular struggles against two Chinese megaprojects here have no doubt been wake-up calls for the leaders in Beijing. Even smaller countries—and a movement led by two former vegetable vendors in a town in the Burmese outback—are now brave enough to challenge the region's most powerful economic and political player.

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