

Obama's foreign po



By Henry A Kissinger

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THE vast diplomatic agenda that the Obama administration has adopted will test its ability to harmonise national priorities such as relations with Iran and North Korea with global and multilateral concerns. President Obama has come into office at a moment of unique opportunity. The economic crisis absorbs the energies of all the major powers; whatever their differences, all need a respite from international confrontation. Overriding challenges such as energy, the environment and

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proliferation concern them to a considerable degree and in an increasingly parallel way. The possibility of comprehensive solutions is unprecedented.

Obama has launched negotiations on an extraordinary range of subjects. Each has a political as well as a strategic component. Each deals with issues peculiar to itself. Each runs the risk that inherent obstacles could obscure ultimate objectives or that negotiating tactics could warp substance. But the challenges are also closely related. For example, arms control negotiations with Russia will affect Russia's role in the non-proliferation effort with Iran. The strategic dialogue with China will help shape the Korean negotiations. The negotiations will also be affected by perceptions of regional balances - of the key participants, for Russia, this applies especially to the former Soviet space in Central Asia; for China and the United States, to the political structure of Northeast Asia and the Pacific Rim.

This reality needs to be translated into some operational concept of world order. The administration's approach seems to be pointing toward a sort of concert diplomacy, which existed for

some two decades after the Napoleonic Wars, in which groupings of great powers work together to enforce international norms. In that view, American leadership results from the willingness to listen and to provide inspirational affirmations. Common action grows out of shared convictions. Power emerges from a sense of community and is exercised by an allocation of responsibilities related to a country's resources. It is a kind of world order either without a dominating power or in which the potentially dominating power leads through self-restraint.

The economic crisis favours this approach even though there are few examples of sustained operation of such a concert. Typically, members of any grouping reflect an unequal distribution of willingness to run risks, leading to an unequal willingness to allocate efforts on behalf of international order, and hence to the potential veto by the most irresolute. The Obama administration need not choose yet whether to ultimately rely on consensus or equilibrium. But it must fine-tune its national security structure to judge the environment it faces and calibrate its strategy accordingly.

The administration's task, particularly with regard to North Korea and Iran, will be to keep the far-flung negotiations led by energetic personalities heading toward an agreed goal. In the process, it must navigate between two kinds of public pressures toward diplomacy endemic in American attitudes. Both seek to transcend diplomacy's traditional give-and-take. The first reflects an aversion to negotiating with societies that do not share our values and general outlook. It

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rejects the effort to alter the other side's behaviour through negotiations. It treats compromise as appeasement and seeks the conversion or overthrow of the adversary. Critics of this approach, who represent the second sort of pressure, emphasise psychology. They consider the opening of negotiations an inherent transformation. For them, symbolism and gestures represent substance.

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Policy challenge

establishing nuclear arsenals in the face of the stated opposition of all the major powers in the UN Security Council and outside of it, the prospects for a homogeneous international order will be severely damaged. In a world of multiplying nuclear weapons states, it would be unreasonable to expect that those arsenals will never be used or never fall into the hands of rogue organisations. A new, less universal approach to world order would be needed. The next (literally) few years will be the last opportunity to achieve an enforceable restraint. If the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia cannot achieve this vis-à-vis a country with next to no impact on international trade and no resources needed by anyone, the phrase "world community" will become empty.

North Korea has recently voided all concessions it made in six years of talks. It cannot be permitted to sell the same concessions over and over again. The six-power talks should be resumed only if Pyongyang restores the circumstances to which it has already agreed, mothballing its plutonium reactor and returning international inspectors to the site. When those talks resume, the ultimate quid pro quo must be the abandonment of the Korean nuclear weapons programme and the destruction of the existing stockpile in return for normalisation of relations at the end of the process. Since the outcome affects all neighbours of North Korea, and since the Korean nuclear programme threatens them more than it does the United States, calls to place the emphasis on bilateral Korean-US talks amount to a call for isolating the United States.

Iran is, of course, a far more complex country with a greater direct impact on its region. The diplomatic process with Iran is just beginning. Its outcome will depend on whether it is possible to establish a geo-strategic balance in the region in which all countries, including Iran, find security without any country dominating. To that goal, bilateral US-Iranian talks are

consensus. The price they have paid is that key issues have remained unresolved and even un-addressed. Some are factual: how far Iran is from developing sufficient enriched materials for a nuclear warhead and how far it is from building a warhead for a missile; the degree to which international inspections could verify a limited enrichment programme declared as peaceful; and how much warning would be

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indispensable. Any negotiations with Iran will be heavily influenced by whether progress toward stability in Iraq continues or whether an emerging vacuum tempts Iranian adventurism.

I have generally found that the best negotiating approach is to put before the other side a full and honest account of one's ultimate objectives. Tactical bargaining - moving through a series of minimum concessions - tests endurance via peripheral issues. But it runs the risk of producing misunderstanding about ultimate purposes. Sooner or later, the fundamental issues have to be addressed. This is particularly necessary when dealing with a country with which there has been no effective contact for three decades.

By contrast, the issue of proliferation is intrinsically multilateral. Heretofore, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and now the United States have coordinated by

available if the declaration were violated.

While the administration seeks to persuade Iran to enter into dialogue (and there must be some point when reiterated requests turn on themselves), it should energetically seek to resolve the factual disputes among our prospective negotiating partners described above. That is the only way to sustain multilateral diplomacy. If no agreement can be reached on these issues, the long-sought negotiations will end in stalemate and wind up, through the veto by the least resolute, legitimising an Iranian nuclear weapons programme.

The administration has launched the country on an important diplomatic enterprise. It now needs to fulfill its vision with a diplomatic plan. COURTESY

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