US FOREIGN POLICY IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY: THE OBAMA ERA BETWEEN THE TEA PARTY-LED OPPOSITION AND THE GLOBAL POWER SHIFT IN THE WORLD POLITICS

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-Abstract-

This paper seeks to examine the US foreign policy under Obama by first trying to explore the rhetorical and practical changes brought by his administration to American foreign policy making and then questioning his track record in the wake of both the growing tide of Tea Party-led political opposition to his policies and the rise of Asian nations such as China and India. Its central assumptions are as follows: Firstly, Obama's foreign policy presents a mix of apparent failures on many key issues and rare achievements in some international crises. It is arguable that Obama has been unable to pursue his own liberal-Democrat agenda so far and instead maintained Bush-style "hard power-oriented" policies. Secondly, as a rapidly rising opposition force, the American right is still powerful enough, with a potential to revitalize a third and Tea Party-led rise of the movement, to reshape the US politics. Thirdly, the study discusses how Obama views the emergence of Asia, as a challenge or opportunity, and how he managed the transformation of world politics in the light of this global power shift. It concludes that US policies should adapt to these new realities of the world order if a peaceful transformation is sought.

Key Words: *The United States, foreign policy, Obama, Tea Party, global power shift.*

JEL Codes: F 50, F 59

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bush presidency between 2001 and 2008 and his conservative political agenda seemed to usher in a new era in which the American power would be reconfigured following the unimpressive domestic and foreign policy record of the Clinton years in the eyes of conservatives. Nonetheless, American society and politics have become increasingly more fragmented and even polarized since the end of the Bush era and Obama's coming to power. The debate launched following his election revolves around the essential question of if the country is still a center-right nation or turned its back to the right and embraced Obama's centre-left and liberal-progressive agenda. It is possible to say that America's right turn speeded up by the events of September 11 terror attacks appeared a thing of past as the conservative movement has largely lost its domination in the domestic political sphere with the advent of President Obama. Indeed, as Amato and Neiwert points out,

> The last few years have been dramatic ones for the conservative movement. Just eight short years ago, drunk on vengeful bloodlust and convinced they had just ushered in a thousand-year reign, the right wing in America was united with their government as never before. Its members culturally enforced their peculiar form of chauvinistic patriotism and insisted that Americans unquestionably submit themselves to the power of the state. They said to trust the president, a man they deified as a warrior god, and condemned anyone who questioned his decisions as a traitor (Amato and Neiwert, 2010: vii-viii).

However, the right turn of American politics may not be a thing of past yet given the result of the latest mid-term elections held on 02 November 2010, which dealt a severe blow to Obama as the Republicans regained the control of the House of Representatives after four years, winning at least 60 more House seats, even though the Democrats managed to retain their narrow majority in the Senate. These results show us that the American public is now more worried about Obama's Democratic agenda and wanted to see it restrained. Obama now faces a stronger opposition from the conservative wing of the Republican Party, the anti-establishment Tea Partiers in particular, who are determined to undo his policies. But it remains to be seen whether their victory signifies the embrace of conservative ideas by the public once again or just a second chance to a movement that brought the country to the brink of collapse only two years ago ("GOP Roars Back…", 2010; "US Elections….", 2010).

2. THE REVIVAL OF THE 'CENTER-LEFT' AGENDA UNDER OBAMA AND ITS TEA PARTY-LED OPPONENTS

During his election campaign, Obama's rhetoric relied mainly on the themes of change and renewal in American national identity from the old one which has been based under G. W. Bush's neoconservatism upon the fear of terror and the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) with a moralistic tone to a new one grounded upon more self-confident and pluralistic ideals and goals with a liberal-pragmatic tone (Fabbrini and Sicurelli, 2009: 61-62). With this mindset, the Obama era in US foreign policy could simply be characterized by mutual collaboration and shared interests rather than the power-politics paradigm of world politics backed by the much-vaulted American exceptionalism (Sanger, 2009: ix, xx). In referring to Obama's soft posture, Funk states that "There [was] a hope that he [would] adopt a humbler policy that is more inclined to listen and negotiate than to dictate and polarize" (Funk, 2009: 133). However, upon his arrival, Obama had to counter a vast array of challenges at both home and abroad, such as the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression of 1929, the standoff with Iran and the hard-line stance Israel took on this issue, two evolving conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and restoring America's shattered image and credibility worldwide.

Obama's soaring rhetoric and liberal-progressivist agenda have been savagely attacked by the political right wings who concur that he intends to undermine and even dismantle the traditional American values and freedoms by, for example, seeking to introduce a universal health care reform, favoring a taxpayer-funded abortion scheme, planning to raise taxes again following the end of Bush-era tax cuts, wishing to appoint activist judges, defending government regulation and intervention into the free markets, searching redistributionist schemes, or just aiming to prohibit the individual use of firearms, all of which were deemed signs of a failed radical "leftist" beliefs or even parts of a tightly secular and "Socialist" conspiracy. Obama critics such as Brad O'Leary (2008: xii) claim here that

> Obama holds sway with utopian notions that his proposed administration of unity, bipartisanship, and compromise will bring about "change." He tells us that those who disagree with his policies can be bent and guided so that dissent will be a thing of the past. But Obama's Smooth Talk Express is a triumph of style over substance.

That he has been abandoned by his father and raised in a Muslim society is also made subject to criticism. Even his past years as a Harvard-educated lawyer, his critics claim, have had a deep impact on shaping his liberal and elitist beliefs. Thus, the arrival of Obama was, for these critics, signifying the end of America as

they got used to. In referring to these extremist right wingers, Amato and Neiwert observes that "…they are hunkered down in a paranoid crouch, convinced that their country has been stolen from them by a usurper–a man so illegitimate that they believe he isn't even an American citizen, much less a qualified leader" (Amato and Neiwert, 2010: viii). Therefore, the Obama-bashers have hardly seen almost anything positive in who he is and what he represents, and rather only sought to disrupt his moderate standing and governance through a sort of reflective negativity and a mix of resentment, partisanship, and even racially and culturally divisive politics.

It appears that the progressive rather than conservative motives lying behind Obama's economic and political agenda are so provocative in view of the Republicans that they have gathered under the so-called Tea Party Movement that opposes almost everything Obama has done so far (Borger, 2010). The main purpose of this movement is to seek a Republican resurgence by undermining the Obama administration. In doing this, they "are tapping into the fear and anger that are washing over a country with over 10 percent unemployment and ongoing economic insecurity" (Amato and Neiwert, 2010: ix). What is striking is that the extreme views of the movement have moved into the mainstream and it is on its way to become an influential political force in the Republican Party as neoconservatives under Bush. Their voice is indeed now heard in every domain of the social and political life, as evidenced by their strong opposition to the Cordoba Center Project, an Islamic cultural center to be built near Ground Zero in New York. Sarah Palin arises one of the most polarizing figure in these kinds of debates as her sharp remarks on many issues sound like right wing populism. But more seriously, this hardening posture on the part of the political right is also the indicative of this strand of populism's alarmingly growing popularity among the mainstream Republicans (Amato and Neiwert, 2010: 155). In the run-up to the mid-term congressional elections in November 2010, the inexperienced Tea Party candidates easily won over their Washington-endorsed establishment rivals in several key Republican primaries and so took further steps toward tightening their grip in the movement (Rollins, 2010). Indeed, the result of the 2 November elections proved the strength of the Tea Partiers who helped the Republican Party to acquire their biggest gain in congressional elections in decades. As the global news channel CNN reports, "No matter how many of the so-called Tea Party candidates win against Democratic opponents Tuesday, the influence of the movement has shifted the Republican agenda to the right" ("GOP Roars Back…", 2010). In the light of these election results that fuelled the distrust between the two parties as well as their supporters, it is now harder to reach any bipartisan

compromise between the government and the Congress. Here are some recent examples of this growing polarization.

One of the most divisive issues splitting the country politics under Obama has been about the handling of US-led global crisis and its aftermath. In the face of the financial downturn, Obama administration has taken some drastic steps with the aim of halting further damage to the financial system and the entire national economy. In pursuit of nearly all of these measures, Obama has faced a strong opposition from the Republicans and the segments of populist right wingers. Among these are the rescue of big corporations severely hit by the crisis, taxation of large financial institutions and lastly, the financial regulation bill passed by the US Congress in 2010. Despite that the latter is called a great success by many liberal circles, American public's cautious response to Obama's financial reform bill shows that his search for a return to big-government days championed by his Democrat antecedents in the past has not been much approved by the Americans, who still have strong antigovernment inclinations and are concerned about the new government regulations although they are equally eager to see Wall Street constrained and fixed ("Has the Tea Party…", 2011). Obama's health care reform was also a target of the American Right's anti-government campaign because it is too costly. Thus these strides Obama took were largely counterproductive in the sense that they would go beyond the public tolerance for and support to more government interference as the majority of American people are getting increasingly anxious about the reach of federal government. Nonetheless, since the mid-2010 this anti-government perception prevailing the public has significantly receded, the Economist argues, as Obama has gotten closer to the center and the huge bail-outs that have turned out to be a success are now a thing of past ("Has the Tea Party….", 2011). Whether or not this means an end to the rise of the Tea Party movement that already peaked remains to be seen.

Just recently, the Democrats and the Republicans also have fiercely clashed over the issue of raising the national debt limit thanks to their enormously different views on taxes and spending ("Bargaining and Blackmail", 2011). The US government debt amounting up to nearly 14.5 trillion dollar has already reached the federal ceiling that needs to be increased immediately. Otherwise, the US would default on its debt and jeopardize its financial credibility, the risks that could also shatter the financial markets worldwide. Both sides wanted to avert the possibility of debt default, but on their terms: While the Republicans insisted on keeping taxes lower and rejecting any new spending, the Democrats focused on increasing tax revenue although they agree with less spending. It seems that this divisive issue is used by the political right to score points against Obama who has

moved towards the center and declared his nomination for 2012 presidential race after the result of mid-term elections last year. However, their position is criticized on the grounds that there is a growing gap between the Republican policies and the grim reality despite that "it used to be that conservatism was a hard-headed set of ideas rooted in reality" (Zakaria, 2011). At the end of this deadlock and only one day before the August 2 deadline, both sides had to agree to a last-minute plan that would raise the federal debt limit up to 2.4 trillion dollar and also cut budget deficit 2.2 trillion over 10 years. But the deal was not welcomed by the Republican Tea Partiers who are not satisfied with the amount of spending cuts, neither was it by some Democrats who wanted to see tax increases ("US Debt…", 2011).

3. OBAMA'S TRACK RECORD IN FOREIGN POLICY

When it comes to the US foreign policy, the Obama administration is not short of strong criticism and opposition, either. As Larrabee noted, one of the major challenges Obama would face was "to manage expectations and keep them from turning to bitterness and sharp disappointment if they are not quickly satisfied. Failure to do so could seriously jeopardize his ability to conduct an effective foreign policy" (Larrabee, 2009: 4). Since his taking office, some suspicions have indeed been raised by those who identified his policies with Bush's in responding to critical threats facing the US. They were even asking questions like "Is Obama Bush Light?" or "How Much Bush Is There in Obama?", and also chastising his spokesman's use of the popular term of the Bush era, "The War on Terror" despite Obama's promise to quit using it. During the first year of his term, Obama shied away from handling the most hot-button issues Bush was struggling with, but when he has to involve in these issues, his every effort to correct the impression that he is a soft-hearted and weak president is now being perceived as if he was increasingly leaning towards a Bushite foreign policy in critical areas of national security (Bettiza and Phillips, 2010: 12-13; "How Much Bush…", 2010).

Actually, Obama was not so a soft or weak figure as his opponents claimed, but he has also failed to live up to high expectations of his core supporters and his foreign policy was also criticized severely by his opponents. In this respect, he and his Kissingerian management style are likened to that of the George H. W. Bush administration which had to manage the end of the Cold War and the implications of this event for US power. In his early days, Obama embarked upon bringing the methods of public diplomacy, such as dialogue and negotiation discredited by Bush II, who heavily relied on the non-diplomatic ways of foreign policy making, namely confrontation, isolation and occupation, back to the

traditional American diplomacy in a series of diplomatic openings toward Russia, Iran and the Muslim world (Farer, 2009: 5). But in the following months and particularly in the second half of 2009, his dynamism and determination has faded in the face of the ensuing foreign policy issues, especially the vexing ones he inherited from Bush, such as Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East peace. The problem here was that Obama was unable both to go beyond the limitations and constraints placed by his predecessor in managing foreign affairs and to replace them with his own foreign objectives and priorities. The stalemate in Middle East peace process, the indeterminate policy over Iran's nuclear program, and the policy of military surge in Afghanistan as the only solution to the worsening Af-Pak problem were among the most disputed issues about which Obama faced accusations. As one scholar put it,

> President Obama, succeeding President George W. Bush, largely adopted Bush's approach to Iraq; decided to use a version of that approach in prosecuting the war in Afghanistan; and widened the terror war beyond the targets pursued by the Bush administration. In the end, the administration even adopted parts of the Bush doctrine (Carter, 2011).

Recently, the Libyan operation launched by NATO and the US against the Gadhafi regime in March 2011 is another example of Obama's Bush-type foreign policy moves (Avlon, 2011). As these features of his foreign policy were of course hailed by his right wing critics, they were also harshly critical of, for example, his "anti-Israel" posture in the Mid-East peace process, his efforts to appease the worsening relations with the Islamic world and his commitment to dialogue with the enemies of the US, most notably Iran (Corsi, 2009: 320-321; Hannity, 2010: 108-129). On the other hand, in view of his liberal base, President Obama was increasingly running out of the credits he received at the beginning of his presidency due to his failure to advance his foreign policy goals. As far as Obama's policy towards the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as his Libya intervention is concerned, indeed, it has been a great disappointment for those hoping a new understanding of foreign policy making since he has failed to break with the Bush legacy in these contested issues and the void between his optimistic rhetoric and the reality has widened further.

4. THE GLOBAL POWER SHIFT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE US FOREIGN POLICY

US attempt to consolidate the neoliberal hegemony through military means under Bush's neoconservatism after the events of 9/11 seems to have been a total failure. It is apparent that Bush's pursuit of filling non-integrating gap remained

unaffected from neoliberal globalization by means of power politics has either widened and deepened it or created new power vacuums which are filled by other aspiring powers. At this point, the arrival of Obama has signified the end of the conservative coalition and the beginning of a new Democrat agenda which promotes soft power and multilateral ways of managing foreign affairs and crises. However, Obama had to deal with a deepening global crisis with disastrous implications for the US economy and the rise of the Asian nations as a great challenge to US power, as well as the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and the controversy over the future of Iraq. As some analysts point out, "…the situation Barack Obama has faced since taking office certainly appears more serious – and less easily reversed – than any of the setbacks the United States has encountered since 1945" (Kitchen and Cox, 2010: 47).

The process of predatory globalization led by the US and international economic agents such as IMF, World Bank and WTO since the early 1980s has resulted in a cycle of periodic crises, lastly exemplified by the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Obama's record in tackling the crisis until now has hardly been consistent with the neoliberal principles championing free and unregulated markets while his steps towards saving US banks and financial firms have been criticized as being the ever largest government intervention into the free markets. So the crisis signified the end of Washington Consensus by heavily destroying its legitimacy. As Buzan put it, "The collapse of neoliberal ideology might yet be seen as an ideational event on the same scale as the collapse of communism in 1989" (Buzan, 2010: 5). This wave of globalization that led to the global crisis has caused an insecure political environment in both the developed and developing world while the ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere against the radical terror groups and extremists have not yielded any positive result so far in achieving the goal of stability and peace within the wider Middle East.

The US-oriented process of neoliberal globalization has also led to an unintended result in the sense that it has paved the way for both the end of the post-Cold War order and the rise of Eastern powers such as China and India while the Western predominance gradually disappears in the aftermath of the global crisis (Buzan, 2010: 5; Buzan, 2011: 5-16; Hart and Jones, December 2010-January 2011: 63; Kitchen and Cox, 2010: 46). The critical question here is whether the rise of Asia-Pacific is a challenge or it can be contained by accommodative policies which may lead to the peaceful formation of a new world order. The Former US Secretary of State Kissinger thinks that China's rise is a great challenge that would result in confrontations between China and the Western nations in the future ("Kissinger: China…", 2011). Actually, China has become not only the

world's biggest exporter but also the second largest economy by overtaking Germany and Japan respectively in the past two years (James, 2011: 530) while it, alongside India, has remained largely untouched by the devastating effects of the 2008-2009 financial chaos as the world's growth engine. As one scholar pointed out, "The accelerated push of China to Great Power status is the major geopolitical outcome of the Great Recession of the early twenty-first century. That outcome carries economic hope but political fear" (James, 2011: 530). In addition to its economic prowess, indeed, China's growing military capabilities with a wide geographical reach are also noteworthy. According to US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, it is no longer a developing country and has already risen to world power status thanks to its rapidly flourishing economic and military power ("Mullen: China…", 2011). For these reasons, China is now the main strategic partner of the US under Obama, who wish to accommodate the Chinese power rather than bully and contain it, in economic and diplomatic terms, even outstripping the Europeans as America's traditional ally. Therefore, the aim of Obama's accomodationist policy has been to reach out China in order to prevent it from challenging the US power and hence to secure the peaceful transformation of world order (Yfantis, 2011).

Against this background, it can be said that the US is in great difficulty in closing the power vacuum neither in the Middle East nor elsewhere and other aspiring powers, most notably China, and mid-sized ones such as Brazil and Turkey as well as the defiant regimes like Iran try to exploit this lack of global leadership. One example is the growing influence of G-20 countries at the expense of G-8 in ruling the world economy while another is the nuclear swap deal of 2010 between Turkey-Brazil duo and Iran (Hart and Jones, December 2010-January 2011: 64). It appears that we are witnessing a new cycle of power shifting as Asia-Pacific with its own model of development and policy-making emerges as the new centre of global economy and politics and the US' global leadership gradually fades away.

5. CONCLUSION

It is arguable that US under President Obama got stuck between the domestic constraints placed by Tea-Party-led opposition at home and the implications of global power shift as well as the Bush legacy he inherited in foreign affairs. Following the heavy defeat Democratic Party took in 2010 mid-term congressional elections and the rise of Tea Party-led conservative movement as a serious opposition force against the government, Obama's turn to the political centre and his conciliatory approach towards his opponents in domestic politics are noteworthy. But whether or not this will help him win the race in 2012

presidential elections remain to be seen. As for foreign policy, despite his initial rhetoric based on US soft power, Obama has so far pursued a foreign policy line which approach to that of the Bush administration in many cases, though he has adopted a more pragmatic-realist one in others such as the engagement with China. He managed to change the course of US foreign policy from a unilateralist posture to a more multilateralist and accomodationist one, but failed to change the substance of previous policies. On the face of this, therefore, his achievements remain largely modest as he was unable to exert the US influence around the globe because of both domestic constraints he has encountered and an unfavourable international setting that becomes increasingly multipolar in the wake of the rising Eastern powers such as China and India. This will require the formation of a new and non-Western economic and political architecture that will have to take into account these new realities of the world politics. The US needs to adapt itself to this transformation that it does not lead alone any longer if it wishes to remain relevant for shaping the future of the world order.

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