

CONSTANCY AND CHANGE IN US FOREIGN POLICY

By Monroe Newman

Professor Emeritus of Economics, Pennsylvania State University

The world doesn't change just because the U.S. changes administrations. And in many ways, neither does the U.S. It retains its obligations, allies, commitments, adversaries, problems and power – military, economic, social and ideological. It retains the internal forces that shape its foreign policy, though there may be a shift in relative strength among them. And it retains the legacy of its history, for most of which it is proud but some of which it might want to expunge.

It is within this framework of constancy that a new administration undertakes to place its mark on the world scene. The Obama administration has been doing that. A partial list of its acts suggests the mark it seeks to make.

In a very short period, it has separated the U.S. from its policies of the past by:

- pursuing changes in climate policy,
- scheduling the closing of Guantanamo and other prisons,
- forbidding torture,
- allowing U.S. funded agencies abroad to instruct in the full range of birth control options, highlighting the evils of human trafficking,
- expressing a willingness to speak with adversaries,
- forging alliances with China and Russia on North Korean matters,
- pressuring Israel to cease the expansion of settlements and questioning their legality, speaking directly and peaceably to the millions of Moslems in the world,
- setting a timetable for military withdrawal from Iraq,
- focusing force against adversaries in Afghanistan,
- helping Pakistan protect its citizens and government,
- altering policies toward Cuba,

- and at the time of this writing, being cautious in discussing the election turmoil in Iran.

Some of the background for just one of these actions can be instructive. Taken separately, a majority of Americans of each faith supports the existence of two states in the land made holy by centuries of bloodshed. Advocating – and going beyond that, offering plans for a two-state solution – satisfies both principles and popular will at home. Some residents of the contested area on both sides are opposed to such a settlement and they and others may have to live and die with their objections.

What principles appear to be operative? First, recognition that being the world's superpower is not an entitlement to overweening power. Secondly, internationally (as well as domestically) that diversity is entitled to a principled welcoming. Next, accommodation and conciliation are not only respectful, they can lead to enduring resolutions. Lastly, that the country's greatest strength is in its ideology so its beacon to the world should not be shuttered by its behavior.

During these months, the world has been changing. Economic forces have stimulated protectionism, increased U.S. financial dependence on foreign investors (leading to questioning of the role of the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency), and worsened income inequality. There was an undesired election outcome in Israel and unexpected outcomes in Lebanon and Iran, unrelenting bellicosity from North Korea backed by actions, and a rise of intolerance in much of the world that is shown in individual attacks and demagogic politics.

The reaction to North Korea may be indicative of a willingness to adjust policy to changing circumstances. Originally offered direct conversations, the North Koreans rejected them and instead lapsed into further threats. The administration's response has been a return to measured forcefulness despite the

possible peril to allies in South Korea and Japan. The administration is warning that combativeness has a limited scope before it becomes unacceptable.

There may well be a more general lesson here. Largely uncharted so far is the new administration's response to non-state adversaries and their sometimes state sponsors and supporters. Harking back to constancy, a hundred years ago an American president recommended a foreign policy of "Speak softly but carry a big stick." The indications so far are that this is what we may see.