

## **THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: CHANGE FOR CYPRUS?**

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### *Hope, Change and Expectations*

Barack Obama campaigned for the Presidency of the United States on a platform of hope and change, and became the 44th person elected to that office amidst a climate of domestic and international euphoria and good will. His election alone represented a shift from the unpopular previous administration of George W. Bush that in its latter days was met with growing disapproval both domestically and abroad; at the time of leaving the White House, George W. Bush had a domestic public approval rating in the 20-30% range, a stark contrast to the post-9/11 days when his popularity had soared to the 90s. Moreover, the international perception of the Bush administration was similar, if not worse. The global expression of solidarity towards the United States in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks had been replaced by exasperation regarding American conduct in the Middle East, and international outcries against human rights violations such as those perpetrated at Abu Ghraib prison. The unprecedented political capital and good will afforded to the Bush administration had been squandered on two mismanaged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq that alienated allies - especially in Europe - and brought the United States little closer to eradicating the presence of Al Qaeda which was a primary objective of the "War on Terror".

Following election, Greek Americans greeted the turnover of power from the Bush to the Obama administration as a positive development. There was a widespread vision of a Hellenophile culture developing in Washington; this belief was bolstered by the reputations of both the President and his second-in-command. Obama has ties to the Greek American community, most significantly through the community's substantial presence in the President's native Chicago. For example, as a US Senator of Illinois in 2006, Obama endorsed Greek American Alexi Giannoulias in his successful bid for state Treasurer. In 2009, Giannoulias started campaigning for the US Senate seat once held by President Obama and has largely been described as Obama's

protege. Moreover, Vice President Joe Biden has long been viewed favorably by the Greek American community in his 36-year senatorial career. As a long-time member and three-time Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, he is considered an expert on the foreign affairs of the region.

Thus, the elements seem to be in place for the Obama administration to usher in a new era in American foreign policy that can redefine his nation's role in the international system at a time when a clear balance of power has yet to replace the obvious and predictable bipolarity of the Cold War. However, Obama is also faced with an unprecedented set of circumstances that place his administration in a precarious position.

### *The Confluence of Domestic and International Politics*

So far in his presidency, Obama has not been the beneficiary of Senator Vandenberg's 1940s aphorism that "politics stops at the water's edge", meaning that domestic politics ought not to interfere with a unified national foreign policy agenda. The Democratic Party's stronghold over the US Congress, where they hold a strong majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, assures the President of strong support for the first two years of his term. Yet, despite this luxury and high overall public approval, a bitter sociopolitical rift seems to be growing between "liberal" and "conservative" America. The Republican Party seems to have lost its vision as a result of recent electoral defeats and the association of the party with the Bush years. As the party searches for a new identity, the existing power vacuum has left it increasingly vulnerable to ideological extremism hijacking the party platform. In the absence of a strong opposition to the administration in Washington - and amidst accusations of racism - attacks on President Obama and his policies have been characterized by uncommonly potent vitriol. The so-called "birther" movement which questions Obama's eligibility for the presidency by raising suspicions on whether he is a natural born citizen of the United States, and the organized Tea Party protests are just some manifestations of this trend. As conservative talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck rise in prominence and become figureheads for the

Republicans, the moderate elements of the party are growing increasingly unable to withstand the movement to the Right, making bipartisanship and a cohesive national agenda in Washington increasingly difficult.

These ideological confrontations are compounded by some very significant problems that may force the United States to look inwards rather than outwards. The global economic crisis (which was largely caused by lack of governmental oversight of banking and business practices in the United States), coupled with the need for a reframed energy policy have presented significant hurdles to the Obama administration. The vigorous debate sparked by the administration's initiative for health reform may constitute the biggest such hurdle. As these power struggles develop domestically in Washington, it may be difficult for the United States to assert an Obama Doctrine with global scope; Bill Clinton faced similar opposition during his tenure when his vision for an internationalist United States was met with calls for American withdrawal and a return to isolationism.

In addition, challenges to such an agenda can come from within Obama's cabinet. In assembling his own "team of rivals" - in allusion to Abraham Lincoln's bipartisan cabinet - Obama has created a strong mix of foreign policy experience. The aforementioned Joe Biden can be an asset, but he also has a history of breaking ranks and going off-message without notice; the extent to which he will conform to Obama's initiatives in the global arena remains to be seen. Defense Secretary Robert Gates - the most significant holdover from the Bush administration - has received widespread bipartisan support. His departure from the policies of his predecessor Donald Rumsfeld and his support for troop withdrawal and strategic reevaluation in Iraq and Afghanistan have been in line with Obama's grand strategic vision, at least to the extent that it has been articulated thus far. Yet he is unlikely to remain in the position for more than one or two years and his replacement may not find bipartisan support so easy to achieve and maintain. Perhaps the greatest challenge from within could come from Obama's State Secretary, Hillary Rodham Clinton. As a former political rival to the President with clear

intentions of bidding for the Presidency in the future, it is obvious that Clinton's actions in the international arena will be calculated for both their short-term (as Obama's cabinet member) and long-term (as a possible future US President) repercussions.

### *The International Dimension*

Lord Palmerston once famously remarked that Britain had no permanent allies, only permanent interests. In the case of the United States, long-standing interests (at least since the end of the 2nd World War) have created some long-standing allies. One such case is the relationship with Turkey, which had been largely defined by Turkey's primary role in NATO during the Cold War due to its geopolitically strategic position. As the alliance once conceived as a counterweight to the now-defunct Warsaw Pact is undergoing redefinition in its scope and purpose in the post-Cold War era, the bilateral relations between the US and individual member states follow suit. Obama has pledged to leave outdated Cold War policies behind, forcing allies - like Turkey - that had traditionally received favored status precisely due to such policies to see bilateral relations with the US in uncertain terms.

During the Bush administration, the relationship was strained by complexities in Turkey's involvement in the "War on Terror" and the war in Iraq. While the United States desired Turkey's involvement in operations in Iraq, the Turkish government did not agree to the use of its shared border with Iraq as the staging ground for these operations. On the other hand, Turkey fears the possibility of Iraq disintegrating into fragmented enclaves that could give rise to the establishment of an independent Kurdistan, which could in turn lead to instability within its own borders.

During his visit to Turkey in April of 2009, Obama spoke to the Turkish Parliament and reiterated America's commitment towards a lasting bilateral partnership and towards Turkish membership in the European Union. He expressed the willingness to help resolve the Cyprus dispute with "a just and lasting settlement that reunifies Cyprus into a bizonal and bicomunal

federation." However, what the American President avoided was the linkage of the two issues. As both Obama and Secretary Clinton have spent the lion's share of 2009 on damage limitation and restoration of US relations after the Bush administration, the fact that Obama's first address at a foreign legislative body came at Turkey is beyond symbolic in its significance.

Different international actors have worn the costume of primary mediators in the Cyprus impasse over the years. Some changes were reflective of broader balance of power considerations such as the United Kingdom being partially replaced by the United States as the power of the latter waxed, while that of the former waned. Yet as the potential of the United Nations to provide the necessary incentive structure for a successful bargaining arrangement between Greek and Turkish Cypriots is being increasingly doubted, it is doubtful that the United States will be either capable or willing to assume the leading role. The European Union has emerged as the actor that can provide the proverbial carrots and sticks to the major players in the conflict, especially Turkey and the two Cypriot ethnic communities. The question remains: what is America's role in this relationship?

### *The American Catch-22*

In dealing with the Cyprus issue, the United States government faces the following dilemma. On the one hand, if the Obama administration acts as agenda-setter in the conflict, then any actor that perceives their position as having been weakened post-settlement may portray the United States as meddling. That image has been long-associated with the world's foremost superpower, and in many cases deserved given its track record during the Cold War, as well as prevailing global sentiment during the Bush years. On the other hand, if the Obama administration takes a backseat to the proceedings, they are liable to being portrayed as washing their hands off Cyprus and risk alienating the major players in the conflict. The only course of action that draws the administration out of the dilemma has to be one that is seen as non-zero-sum; in other words, one that is perceived as mutually beneficial, especially by the two ethnic communities on the island. At the same time, the

greatest risk for the United States is the creation of a renewed rift in Turko-American relations; as a result, one cannot expect Washington to administer undue pressure on Ankara.

Yet, as already mentioned, it is clear that such an outcome cannot be unilaterally provided by the United States since the process of accession for Turkey to the European Union is intrinsically tied to Cyprus. That is a conundrum in which the United States will be loathe to become entangled. What the United States can do under the Obama administration is to create the same avenues for communication and encouragement for open dialogue that

have characterized American foreign policy since Obama's assumption of the presidency, even though these labours have yet to bear fruit. A significant contribution to the Cyprus peace process would contribute to the validation of Obama's recently announced award of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, which was met with praise as well as criticism of premature reward for intentions rather than results. Such a course of action would also be in line with Obama's assertion during his speech at the Turkish Parliament that in the case of Cyprus "there is cause for hope".