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Look out, Russia, the US is back!

By all appearances, it seems reasonable to suggest that Barack Obama's visit to Warsaw on June 3-4, 2014 has revealed a whole new face of the US administration. No matter how one interprets the words and gestures of the US president, the tone and power of Obama's language was a clear departure from his usual line of politics, as observed recently, especially on international issues where, eroded by hesitation and indecision, his stance lacked grit and determination. It was not without reason that the United States has recently been seen as losing its international clout and effectiveness.

Much of the impairment of America's international influence is a legacy handed down by the George W. Bush administration which, acting in its usual arbitrary and forceful manner in flagrant violation of rules, did a great deal of damage to US foreign relations including those with its closest partners and allies, thus undermining the support for and popularity of America. Even despite his radical departure from political muscle-flexing and arrogance and his renewed emphasis on diplomacy, President Obama found himself unable to reverse the trend. To make things worse, the US has lost its position as the leader of the western world.

America's policy of pure diplomacy and gentleness did little to boost the country's esteem internationally. As necessary as this image change has been to recover from the Bush era, the United States (which, although no longer a hegemon, retained many of its superpower attributes) needed to display more effectiveness, determination and courage. This proved particularly important in the dog-eat-dog world it faced, filled with fundamentally opposed powers competing fiercely against one another and particularly the US, a world in which what counted the most was not only diplomacy and negotiating skills but also the capacity and determination to act.

Perhaps the talk of the “tempering qualities of humility and restraint” may have had a certain appeal when juxtaposed with the Bush administration’s abrasive style. Yet, it lacked the potential to restore the US to its leadership position in the long run. Similarly, as understandable and even necessary as the reset of the relationship with Russia was considering, among others, the need to close a deal with Moscow on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty regarding nuclear missiles, shipments to Afghanistan and later, the Syrian issue, the reset has crossed a dangerous line. As a matter of fact, it was due to the reset that the Obama administration abandoned its original plans to deploy a ballistic missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. The reset also led to an ambiguous confidential exchange between Obama and the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in March 2012 which revealed just how hung-up the White House was on Moscow’s opinions. Obama’s gestures and acts have again evoked gloomy reflections in Central and Eastern Europe regarding the significance of their actions for Washington and America’s credibility.

Last but not least, Obama administration’s pivot to the Pacific Rim further jeopardized America’s ties with Europe and its existing closest allies and partners. Especially that, in the late 2011, the administration announced it would scale back its military in Europe and cut defense spending over the following decade. The rhetorical question is whether such politics on the part of Washington have not encouraged the imperialistic aspirations of Vladimir Putin giving him hopes for impunity in Ukraine.

Seen from this viewpoint, the latest response of the White House to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and, most of all, President Obama’s speech in Warsaw, have shown that the US is determined to remain the leader of the free world or become one again. It is also prepared to take any steps necessary to restore its international clout and prestige. This, among others, is what was meant by Obama’s reference to NATO as “the strongest alliance in the world” and to “the armed forces of the United States of America [as being] the most powerful military in history”.

Such references to America’s traditional commitment to disseminate freedom and build democracy around the world have reaffirmed the aspiration to retain primacy in the international scene. The US president said: “(...) as free peoples, we are joined together not simply to safeguard our own security but to advance the freedom of others. Today we affirm the principles for which we stand. We stand together because we believe that people and nations have the right to determine their own destiny”. Turning to Ukraine, he vouched: “We stand together because we believe that upholding peace and security is the responsibility of



every nation”. (...) Our nations cannot be complacent in pursuit of (...) a Europe that is whole and free and at peace. (...) We have to stand with those who seek freedom”.

The statements bring back some of the sound bites heard from the previous president of the United States, as included in the so called Bush doctrine. Bush referred to America’s obligation to lead other nations as “a lasting model of national success” insisting that “no nation may be kept from pursuing a life of freedom and justice”. Note that a very different view on promoting and defending freedom and democratic rule in the world was expressed by the Obama administration a few years ago in its National Security Strategy which argued that the best way to defend and promote values is to respect them in one’s own country. And nothing more. This shows the extent of the changes in Obama’s approach to America’s international responsibility.

First and foremost, however, the US president came to Poland with a tough message on the significance of the United States maintaining strong military and political ties with its European allies. He referred to hard power as foundation of international relations. Such an approach to foreign relations is precisely what George W. Bush was criticized for by the current President. It is Obama, however, that pledged to bolster US military presence in Europe, promising to contribute \$1 billion to support NATO’s easternmost flank and committing to send more US/NATO troops and equipment to the region.

This unprecedented emphasis on US obligations to help safeguard the security of Central and Eastern Europe should be viewed as meaningful, especially when contrasted with the upsetting earlier decisions by the Obama administration which appeared to have removed this part of the European continent from the US priority list. This time Obama not only reaffirmed that Central Europe is a cornerstone of American security but also referred to the significance of art. 5 of the Washington treaty and committed to apply it when necessary: “Article 5 is clear, an attack on one is an attack on all. And as allies, we have the solemn duty – a binding treaty obligation – to defend your territorial integrity. We stand together, now and forever, for your freedom is ours”, said the US President addressing a Polish crowd in Palace Square. The issue of “mutual defense” and the contingency plans came up repeatedly during Obama’s visit to Poland, demonstrating clearly the United States’ resolve to uphold the commitments laid down in art. 5 of the Washington Treaty.

The strongest message heard from the US leader in Poland concerned Russia. It was in fact reminiscent of a reset *à rebours*. The tough words on “Russia’s aggression against Ukraine” proclaiming that “(...) we will not accept Russia’s occupation of Crimea or its violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty” and warning that any further provocations by Russia “will only mean more isolation and cost for Russia” as “bigger nations must not be allowed to



bully the small or impose their will at the barrel of a gun”, brought to mind tough statements expressed not only by Bush but also by US Cold War era politicians. And while some might feel that Obama’s statements lacked teeth and were overly soft, one cannot but admit that the US president’s rhetoric made him come across as a powerful and decisive leader of the free world. Especially that, delivered with a passion and conviction, these words came from the mouth of no other but the man who had previously been accused of having abandoned his role as an international leader.

While it is uncertain what actions the US will take in the follow-up to Obama’s stern language, it was still good to hear it, at least as an indication of the course the current administration has set out to follow. The US is returning to a more effective foreign policy style which better befits the rank of this superpower and its commitments. It remains to be seen whether any of this will convince Putin to clean up his act. Much depends on whether Europe will live up to its responsibilities and join the US in its new campaign for peace and stability on the European Continent and, most of all, in seeking a favorable resolution to the Ukrainian conflict. After all, the US president has renewed his appeal to European partners reminding them that: “Every NATO member is protected by our alliance, and every NATO member must carry its share in our alliance. This is the responsibility we have to each other”.

All in all, the ball is now in Europe's court. President Bronisław Komorowski’s vow to increase defense spending to two percent of the GNP seems to demonstrate Poland's commitment to carry its share. If the majority of the European allies display similar resolve to take on challenges and bear the necessary costs on this and other matters, they will not only satisfy Washington but also, and more importantly so, contribute to restoring the trans-Atlantic treaty to its former effectiveness and significance. And then, Russia, before you take your next step, think twice about all the “pros and cons”.

The statements expressed in this text exclusively reflect the views of its author.

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