

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



Barack Obama and deterring China

In his failure to impose the US' superpower status, the current US president resembles Jimmy Carter

In my last column, I argued that to ensure China chooses the “trading state” strategy as it rises geopolitically, rather than one based on aggression, it was imperative that the United States, as the sole superpower, follow a policy of deterrence. As Stanford University’s classical historian Victor Davis Hanson, who has been surveying the parallels between the earlier rise of Germany and Japan, has succinctly observed, wars with rising powers are caused by an absence of deterrence, which “encourages adventurism, as aggressive powers are unsure of their relative strength (or the will to use it) of their rivals and thus believe they might gain an advantage by risking or even inviting war. War, then, becomes a litmus test for verifying which nations or alliance of nations were the most powerful all along. Peace returns when such clarity is re-established, as the weaker, defeated party accepts post-war subordination”. Has US President Barack Obama learned the lesson of deterrence of rising powers to avoid the litmus test of war?

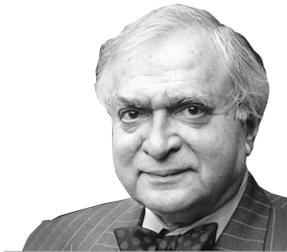
Prima facie it seems so, with the recent toughening of the US’ stance on China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea, and its warning that it could move more forces into the Western Pacific if China declares a new air defence zone in the South China Sea. But how seriously is China likely to take these protestations against its testing of the US’ resolve in maintaining its military superiority in the Pacific, and honouring its treaty obligations?

Under both George W Bush and Mr Obama, the US has made some serious mistakes in maintaining the US’ role as the sole superpower. In both Iraq and

Afghanistan, the initial military campaigns were resoundingly successful and showed how, with the revolution in military affairs, the US is an unmatched military power. But serious mistakes were made in maintaining and securing the peace. The resultant insurgencies required further expenditure of men and materiel to quell them. This has drastically reduced domestic support in the US for muscular military action.

But the quelling of the insurgencies by the respective military “surges” in the two countries that should have been followed by maintaining some residual US force to exercise continuing American influence in the two countries has been belied by Mr Obama’s haste in withdrawing troops from Iraq without an agreement as planned by the Bush administration. This could have acted as guarantor of a multiethnic state. Instead, Iraq has again descended into a civil war, which – with the ongoing conflict in Syria (where Mr Obama’s “red lines” turned out to be written in water) – is threatening to create a Shia-versus-Sunni civil war across West Asia, foretelling another battle of Karbala. While in Afghanistan, Robert Gates, former secretary of defence, in his recent memoir said this about Mr Obama’s professed strategy: “The president doesn’t consider the war to be his. For him it’s all about getting out.”

Added to these perceptions about Mr Obama’s credibility in maintaining a robust military stance are the various other missteps, such as withdrawing the missile shield aimed at Iran under Russian pressure without getting anything in return; “leading from behind”



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in Libya; the shilly-shallying on Egypt; the dilution of the “red line” on the Iranian nuclear bomb. Clearly it would not be unreasonable for the Chinese to deduce that the US is unlikely to use its superior military power to check their ambitions in the Pacific.

In fact, Mr Hanson sees in these seeming US foreign policy misadventures under Mr Obama a hidden strategic Obama Doctrine. It is a gradual retreat from the US superpower role, with the resulting vacuum filled by regional powers. “The current global maladies – Islamist terrorism, Middle Eastern tensions, Chinese muscle-flexing, Russian obstructionism, resurgence of Communist autocracy in Latin America – will fade once the US lowers its profile and keeps out of other nation’s business.” But this withdrawal is to be accompanied “by the semblance of power. That is rhetoric, loud deadlines and red lines, and drones can for now approximate the old US presence, as America insidiously abandons its 70-year role as architect of a global system that brought the world unprecedented security and prosperity. “No option is off the table” tells most foreign leaders that probably no option ever was on it.” This retreat into isolationism also fits the current US popular mood: weary of war and still suffering from the consequences of the Great Recession, in an eerie replay of the interwar years.

What can India do in this increasingly dangerous world? First, it must return from its current stagflation to the robust growth its fundamentals allow. Second, it must maintain its current naval edge over China, while shoring up its northern defences. Third, it must continue with Manmohan Singh’s “Look East” foreign policy, and seek to build a coalition against Chinese assertiveness with Japan, Russia, Australia and – hopefully – Iran. Fourth, following the British example in countering Wilhelmine Germany’s rise, nothing would send a stronger signal to contain China’s hubris-fuelled drive for global hegemony than an Indian rapprochement with Pakistan.

Whether this will be possible – even though the current stars are maybe favourably aligned – will ultimately depend on the Pakistan military realising that though India may be its enduring enemy, a rapprochement with India offers the route to prevent it from becoming a vassal of China in its age-old imperial tradition.

But, despite the growing signs of American isolationism, its superior economic and military power must not be written off. Mr Obama seems more and more to resemble a Democratic predecessor, Jimmy Carter, who followed another period of war-weariness after the Vietnam War. I was in Washington when the Soviets marched into Afghanistan; Mr Carter’s prime-time broadcast is seared into my memory. There was the ashen-faced president of the US – the defender of the free world – saying he had been assured by the Soviet president that they would not go into Afghanistan!

But a great virtue of the US political system is that a limp Jimmy Carter was soon followed by a robust Ronald Reagan, who restored the US’ superpower status. Given that the US still has all the means to remain a superpower, it would be a serious error for its competitors to believe that there will be no turn in the political wheel, which brings a more assertive administration to power to restore its superpower status, recognising that deterring rising revanchist powers is essential to maintain peace.

(1) www.ricochet.com/main-feed/Will-China-Go-Back-to-the-Future
 (2) “Obama’s recession” (www.nationalreview.com)