

views • letters

JOSEPH S. NYE

First term of 'Obama Doctrine'

Public-opinion polls in the United States indicate a close presidential election in November. While President Barack Obama outpolls Republican challenger Mitt Romney on foreign policy, slow economic growth and high unemployment — issues that are far more salient in US elections — favor Romney. And, even on foreign policy, Obama's critics complain that he has failed to implement the transformational initiatives that he promised four years ago. Are they right?

Obama came to power when both the US and the world economy were in the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Indeed, some of Obama's economic advisers counseled him that unless urgent steps were taken to stimulate the economy, there was a one-in-three chance of entering a full-scale depression.

Thus, although Obama also inherited two ongoing wars, nuclear-proliferation issues from Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the continuing problem of al-Qaida's terrorism, his early months in office were devoted to addressing the economic crisis at home and abroad. His efforts were not a complete success, but he managed to stave off the worst outcome.

Obama's rhetoric during his 2008 campaign and the first months of his presidency was both inspirational in style and transformational in objective. His first year in office included a speech in Prague in which he established the goal of a nuclear-free world, a speech in Cairo promising a new approach to the Muslim world, and his Nobel Peace Prize speech that promised to "bend

history in the direction of justice."

In part, this series of speeches was tactical. Obama needed to meet his promise to set a new direction in foreign policy while simultaneously managing to juggle the issues left to him by George W. Bush, any of which, if dropped, could still cause a crisis for his presidency. Nonetheless, there is no reason to believe that Obama was being disingenuous about his objectives. His worldview was shaped by the fact that he spent part of his youth in Indonesia and had an African father.

In the words of a recent Brookings Institution book, Obama had an "activist vision of his role in history", intending to "refurbish America's image abroad, especially in the Muslim world; end its involvement in two wars; offer an outstretched hand to Iran; reset relations with Russia as a step toward ridding the world of nuclear weapons; develop significant cooperation with China on both regional and global issues; and make peace in the Middle East". But his record of achievement on these issues has been mixed.

"Seemingly intractable circumstances turned him from the would-be architect of a new global order into a leader focused more on repairing relationships and reacting to crises — most notably the global economic crisis," the book continues. And while he eliminated Osama bin Laden and weakened al-Qaida, some counter-terrorism policies ended up undercutting his appeal in places like the Middle East and Pakistan.

Some of the half-empty glasses were the result of intractable events; some were the product of early naiveté, such as the initial approaches to Israel, China

and Afghanistan. But Obama was quick to recover from mistakes in a practical way. As one of his supporters put it, he is a "pragmatic idealist".

In this sense, though Obama did not back away from rhetorical expressions of transformational goals regarding such issues as climate change or nuclear weapons, in practice his pragmatism was reminiscent of more incremental presidential leaders like Dwight Eisenhower or George H. W. Bush. Despite his relative inexperience in international affairs, Obama showed a similar skill in reacting to a complex set of foreign-policy challenges. This was demonstrated by his appointments of experienced advisers, careful management of issues, and above all, keen contextual intelligence.

This is not to say that Obama has had no transformational effects. He changed the course of an unpopular policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, embraced counter-insurgency tactics based on less costly uses of military and cyber power, increased American soft power in many parts of the world and began to shift America's strategic focus to Asia, the global economy's fastest-growing region.

With respect to Iran, Obama struggled to implement United Nations-approved sanctions and thus avoid a premature war. And, while the "Arab Spring" presented him with an unwelcome surprise, after some hesitation he came down on what he regarded as the side of history.

In a new book, *Confront and Conceal*, David Sanger describes what he calls an "Obama Doctrine" (though he faults him for not communicating it

more clearly): a lighter military footprint, combined with a willingness to use force unilaterally when American security interests are directly involved, reliance on coalitions to deal with global problems that do not directly threaten US security and "a rebalancing away from the Middle East quagmires toward the continent of greatest promise: Asia."

The contrast between the killing of bin Laden and the intervention in Libya illustrates the "Obama Doctrine". In the former case, Obama personally managed a unilateral use of force, which involved a raid on Pakistani territory. In the latter, where national interests were not as clear, he waited until the Arab League and the UN had adopted resolutions that provided the legitimacy needed to ensure the right soft-power narrative, and then shared the leadership of the hard-power operation with NATO allies.

The long-term effect of the "Obama Doctrine" will require more time to assess, but, as he approaches the November election, Obama appears to have an edge over his opponent in foreign policy. Obama has not bent the arc of history in the transformational way to which he aspired in his campaign four years ago, but his shift to a pragmatic approach may turn out to be a good thing, particularly if voters continue to have doubts about the economy.

Project Syndicate

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LETTERS

How to curb realty speculation

Comment on "Local property markets under scrutiny" (China Daily, July 25)

The authorities should be able to tell the difference between speculative buying and long-term investment (the latter includes first-time buyers).

And local authorities should share their databases on house ownership with the central database to complete the full picture of the domestic property market.

Moreover, the authorities must separate property investments and affordable houses, which are being developed to serve the poor in China. In addition, the age limit of borrowers or mortgagees should extend to 70 years instead of 60, and accordingly people's working age, too, should be extended.

All these measures can be used effectively to curb speculation in the real estate market and promote home ownerships.

ELEE, on China Daily website

Pay attention to public sports

Comment on "Silver and bronze are golden too" (China Daily, July 31)

I do agree with the article that China has paid excessive attention to medals, and spent huge amounts of money on competitive sports but little on public sports.

A country that is weak in public sports can't be described as a sports power, no matter how many medals it wins. It's time to change that trend.

JACK, on China Daily website

The way to foil Japan's plans

For China and the rest of Asia, unfortunately there are an increasing number of Japanese elites that seem to be attempting to resurrect Japan's past by making their country a belligerent military power.

Japan is not only using China as an excuse to increase its military spending and claim sovereignty over islands that have always been Chinese territory, it is also claiming territory that is currently part of Russia and the Republic of Korea.

Under the guise of being an ally of the United States, Japan is obviously finding ways to rebuild its military strength and threaten the peace and prosperity of East Asia.

The best way to subdue the ambitions of Japan's warlike military class and support the Japanese who realize the futility of their country's pursuit of a military path is for China to seek common ground on this issue with the ROK and Russia.

With the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands under threat from Japan, it is certain that many Taiwan residents will find common ground with their mainland brethren on this issue.

ROSS GRAINGER, via e-mail

Blame the Games structure

Comment on "Sportsmanship more important" (China Daily, Aug 3)

I am an American and I have read the column about the disqualification of badminton players at the London Olympic Games.

I respect what has been written about sportsmanship. But it seems the problem also lies with the way that the competition is structured.

In chess, one is allowed to sacrifice a pawn, even a bishop or queen, to checkmate the king. So if the Olympic committee does not want to reward such strategies, it should structure the competition differently.

In fact many players may be losing matches by such a well-concealed maneuver that is looks entirely natural.

To me, the more reprehensible action was the US coach's, who insinuated that Chinese swimming gold medalist Ye Shiwen had used drugs. There should have been a call for the US coach to resign, because he violated the Olympic spirit, as well.

And congratulations to China for its superb performance in the Olympics!

JOHN WALSH, via e-mail

Truth behind US military

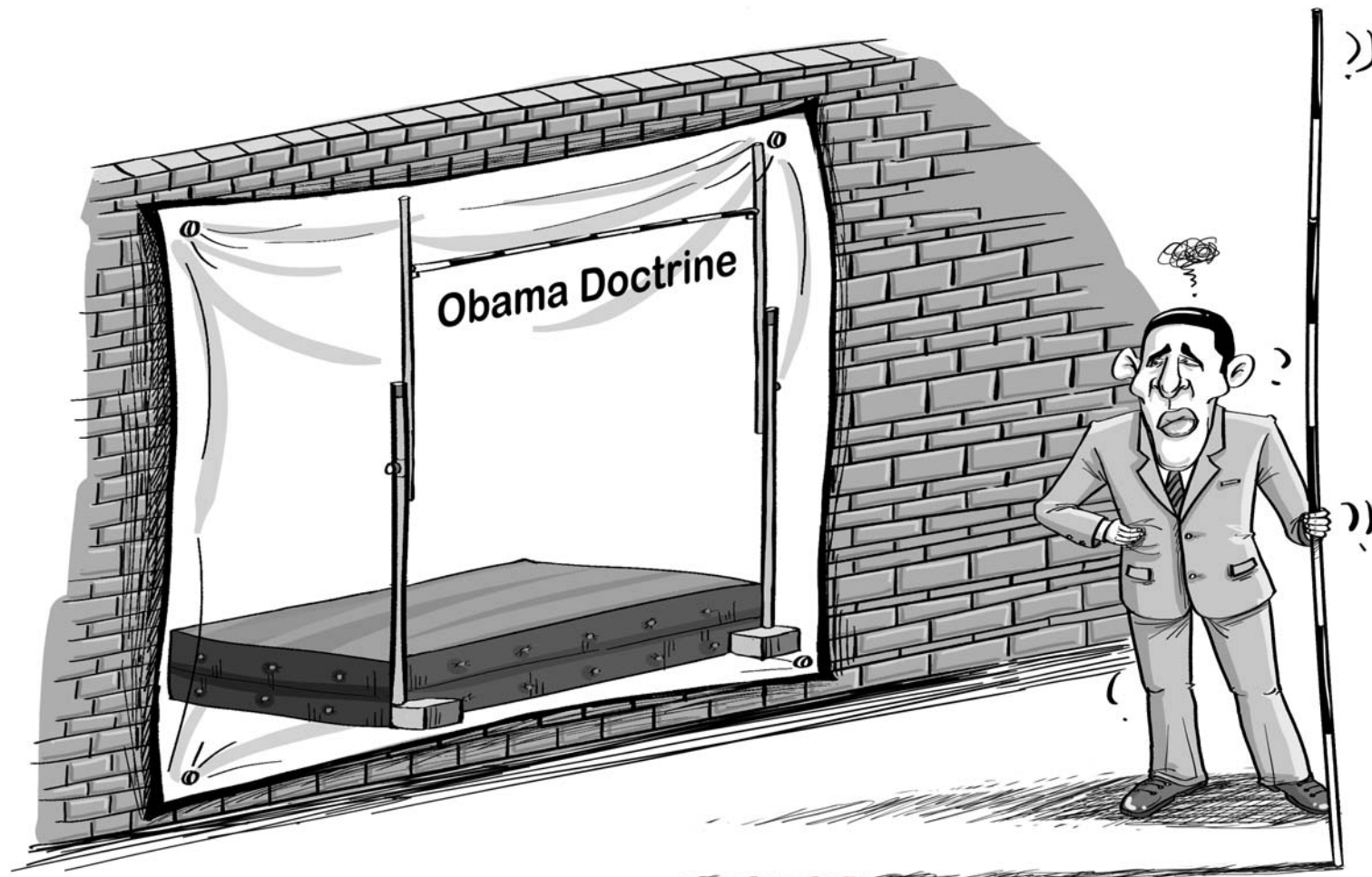
Comment on "Romney tests China policy" (China Daily, Aug 8)

Building the military means building the country. But the United States is not building its military to build the country.

It has been dreaming about controlling the world. That's why it is building more military power than it needs to protect its territory and sovereignty.

MOHAMED, on China Daily website

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WANG XIAOYING / CHINA DAILY

BAI PING

Real estate rebounds as buyers return

Will the property market rebound with a vengeance in the wake of recent rise in prices?

Some market watchers believe as long as the government allows families to own only one or two houses, which has effectively kept investors out, genuine homebuyers will continue to stay on the sidelines while prices fall. They dismiss the chances of further price increases and blame developers and speculators for hyping up the market sentiment.

But it's also possible that the market is slipping into another round of overheating, as lower interest rates and excess liquidity unleash buyers' pent-up demand for nicer and better-located homes.

At least this is what I've felt over the past several weeks when I put my home on the eastern edge of Beijing city for sale.

My wife and I planned a long time ago to move into a neighborhood with better schools when our son reached

kindergarten age. But we found it difficult to sell our duplex house, until early July.

Suddenly, my cell phone started ringing day and night with calls from agents who seemed to have rebooted after a lifeless lull. On the morning of our first open house, we received six families — a young couple, three middle-aged couples with children in tow and two families of three generations.

They were no nouveau riche type of buyers like the legendary coalmine bosses from Shanxi province, prone to placing a deposit — wads of renminbi notes stuffed in a rumpled plastic bag — on the spot. They were owners-occupiers who discussed with us if the grandparents should live upstairs, asked about the reputation of local schools and checked on mundane details about the house such as heating costs in winter.

Then came the bids, all beating our asking price.

Quite a few offered to pay up front, meaning they would have to bank the

equivalent of more than half a million dollars in our account when the deed was transferred. Others were ready to pay higher prices, but only in installments over several months during which they could sell their current houses and arrange for loans in case of a shortfall.

Agents said such selling and buying of houses have been common among buyers and can involve quite a few parties if everybody needs to sell before buying to meet the government curbs on home ownership. They see boundless business potential from the up-graders: Many pensioners will move out of the city center to live in bigger houses with fresher air and more greenery, while young people who could only afford to buy their first home in outlying suburbs will try to move into central areas for better schools and hospitals when they have children.

While we weighed the offers, housing prices of our community continued to rise, reaching close to the levels

of two years ago when the latest round of cooling measures were introduced. The older estates with more amenities, such as the Fangzhuang community in the southern part of the city, have reportedly seen prices rise at a faster pace, spurred by cheaper and more accessible mortgage loans after banks cut interest rates twice this year.

As would-be homeowners start to panic, assuming housing prices will shoot up again, the situation begs the question what the government's next move will be. Now that speculation has been effectively curbed and the market is awash with cash because of the economic stimulus measures, will bigger bazookas be rolled out to shoot down housing prices?

We decided to delay selling our home after we realized what sort of house we could buy in popular school districts with the proceeds now. We don't want to live in seller's remorse later.

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