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Hillary's first 100 days

Stephen Zunes | May. 11, 2009

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speaks during a joint news conference with her Iraqi counterpart, Hoshyar Zebari, in the headquarters of the Foreign Ministry in Baghdad April 25. (Reuters/Pool /Hadi Mizban)

Hillary Clinton has received mixed though generally favorable reviews, both internationally and domestically, during her first 100 days as secretary of state. Public opinion polls in the United States give her a more than 70 percent-positive rating.

Still, concerns linger regarding her eight years in the Senate, during which she supported some of the more controversial initiatives of the Bush administration, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq, criticisms of the World Court and United Nations, and defense of Israeli occupation policies and military offenses against its neighbors.

Clinton has been slow to appoint a number of key officials, including regional assistant secretaries, and many of the appointments she has made have been of center-right veterans of the foreign policy establishment, many of whom were prominent in her husband?s administration, not the younger, more innovative figures many had hoped to see. Indeed, given that Barack Obama as a candidate promised not just to end the war in Iraq but to ?end the mindset that led to the war in Iraq,? the prominent State Department roles given to supporters of the illegal invasion of that oil-rich country have been disturbing.

In certain ways, Clinton?s path has been made easier simply by the fact that her boss is not George W. Bush. Indeed, the enthusiasm overseas for Obama?s election has been unprecedented. Yet the penchant for unilateralism and disregard for the views of its allies for which the Bush administration became so notorious was also in evidence during her husband?s administration, such as the Clinton administration?s support for Israeli occupation policies, the enactment of the embargo of Cuba, and the continuation of draconian sanctions, accompanied by unauthorized air strikes, against Iraq, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths.

Despite this, Clinton has demonstrated that U.S. foreign policy under the Obama administration will be very different from that under Bush. In one of her first actions as secretary, she met with a large group of career State Department personnel -- well-regarded experts in their respective fields who were consistently ignored under the previous administration -- to thank them for their service and welcome their input.

On her trips abroad, she has put her experience as a campaigner to work, spending as much time listening as talking, trying to shore up the image of the United States, so badly damaged under the Bush administration. Her style is far more frank and open than the conservative intellectual Condoleezza Rice or the career military officer Colin Powell.

It is not unusual for a president to want to be his own secretary of state, but rarely has a secretary so badly wanted to be her own president. Despite this, she has demonstrated an ability to be a willing subordinate to the commander in chief.

Despite her decidedly hawkish record while on Capitol Hill, Clinton has shown herself willing to adjust to the more moderate policies of Obama. For example, despite her harsh criticism during the primary campaign of Obama?s call to negotiate with Iran, it was Clinton herself who invited the Islamic Republic to take part in multiparty talks on Afghanistan.

Similarly, while in Israel, she raised concerns about Israel?s mass demolition of Palestinians? homes and construction of new settlements in the occupied West Bank.

While referring to policies that constitute flagrant violations of international humanitarian law and a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions as simply being ?unhelpful? is certainly an understatement, this was still more criticism of Israel than she ever said publicly during her eight years in the U.S. Senate.

Still, while most of the international community recognizes that a unified Palestinian Authority -- which would include moderate members of Hamas -- is necessary for the peace process to move forward, Clinton told Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on that same trip that a coalition government with a party that does not recognize Israel?s right to exist would be unacceptable, even threatening to cut off all humanitarian aid. By contrast, she has expressed no similar concern that Israel?s new coalition government is dominated by hard-line parties that oppose Palestine?s right to exist, and has even pledged to continue sending billions of dollars in unconditional military and economic aid to that right-wing government.

Human-rights activists were disappointed in her deliberate downplaying of human-rights violations during her visit to China. And she has had awkward moments during her travels responding to questions about U.S. military bases, now in more than 130 countries around the world.

Yet she has also emphasized the importance of ?soft power? -- the use of America?s political, diplomatic, economic and human capital to advance the country?s strategic interests -- rather than reliance primarily on military means. She has stressed the need for international action to fight climate change. And she gained the respect of many in Latin America by acknowledging, during a trip to Mexico, U.S. culpability in the violence in the northern part of that country resulting from the insatiable appetite of Americans for illegal drugs.

Unfortunately, the fundamental problems with U.S. foreign policy in the early 21st century, rooted in hegemonic aspirations and imperial designs, go far beyond what Secretary of State Clinton or even President Obama can change on their own. Even the most enlightened foreign affairs minister or prime minister in 19th-century London could not fundamentally change the character of the British Empire. For those of us desiring a more radical change in the United States? role in the world, we cannot simply hope for change emanating from Washington.

Instead, we must recognize our responsibility as citizens to bring about the change ourselves.

Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and chair of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of San Francisco.

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