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Obama's Soft Power: How the World is Coping with It

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Barack Obama's cultural diplomacy has made headlines recently, particularly during his Asian tour in November. His apparent attempts at soft power diplomacy have garnered critics and admirers within his administration and the world over. What does this mean for the US and the rest of the world?

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S November approval ratings hit an all-time low across the board. In mid-November, electronic public opinion polling distributor Rasmussen Reports revealed that the president's total approval hit 45 per cent, compared to 54 per cent disapproval. The *Washington Post* reported similar results from the Gallup polls. The decline in support for the president became pronounced mid-year, sliding from about 60 per cent approval to hit the sub-50 region in November. This falling trend in approval numbers has observers saying that it is synonymous to the drop experienced by previous post-World War II presidents Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, and Bill Clinton. Reagan fell below the 50 per cent mark around the same time of year in 1981.

Declining Domestic Support, but Popular Abroad

It appears that domestic issues such as the debate over national health care reform and economic problems continued to drag down Obama's public support. Americans are also concerned about the Obama administration's reliance on government spending to solve the nation's problems and the growing federal budget deficit. In a more recent December poll after Obama's decision to deploy some 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan, however, his approval ratings saw an uptick to about 50 per cent from the previous month. This support, according to *Fox News*, came mainly from the Republican camp as Obama continues to lose the interest of independents and conservative Democrats over issues at home. With his best ratings coming from the Afghanistan issue following the floundering of his approval numbers over a multitude of domestic problems, Americans are clearly dissatisfied with Obama's performance just over a year since he entered the White House.

Abroad, however, poll numbers show a positive appreciation for the president. Over 80 percent of the people in Japan, China, and South Korea share about the same amount of confidence in Obama to "do

the right thing in world affairs”, according to a poll by Pew Research Centre's Global Attitudes Project. These positive numbers from Asian countries are backed by even higher ratings from the likes of Germany, Kenya, Nigeria, and Britain that think the president “inspires a lot of confidence” in them.

Although it is impossible to measure Obama’s performance as United States president thus far, judging from the different approval ratings at home and abroad, it appears that his foreign policies and diplomacy have won him more fans overseas than at home. His November tour to Asia, for example, has garnered criticism and appreciation from different camps as Obama displayed cultural diplomacy at its best.

In Japan bent too low, in China too slow?

“How low will he go? Obama gives Japan’s Emperor Akihito a wow bow” read the November 14, 2009 headline of the Los Angeles Times. Many Americans were offended by Obama’s gesture of bending over to greet the emperor during his trip to Japan as they regarded bowing a symbolic acknowledgement of submission and inferiority. This year’s bow to Akihito by Obama was deemed “unnecessary”, his apologies “overdone”. Criticisms came mostly from conservatives who believed that America never had and should never bow to royalties as it signifies deference in several cultures. Obama came under similar fire after he made a similar bowing gesture to the Saudi king earlier this year.

Not only was Obama’s bowing scrutinised by the American public, he was also criticised back home for not inciting change in his two-and-a-half day trip to China in November. He could not get the Chinese to budge on issues such as support for tougher sanctions on Iran, currency exchange rates, and increased Internet freedom. The limited results Obama obtained seemed to reflect the shift in Sino-US relations and global politics – America’s position has weakened, and China’s power and influence have rapidly risen in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.

Obama, soft power and US hegemony

But do Obama’s bowing and cautious negotiations with China signify a retreat and decline in American power? Perhaps conservative Americans cannot fathom a world that is less America-centric, one where the power balance seems likely to shift, much less the idea of effective negotiation through soft power politics. US foreign policy took a more adventurous turn and the American economy slipped into very murky waters during the George W. Bush years. One would be hard put to see the Bush presidency attempt to enhance American standing in the world through adroit cultural diplomacy.

Conversely, Obama’s cultural gestures can collectively be interpreted as a deft manoeuvre to open up communication and diplomatic channels that have waned or been damaged during the Bush era. Obama seems to be reviving US soft power in order to advance American goals. It is as if he is taking the cue from Antonio Gramsci that hegemony obtains from ideational power and consent. Consensual authority makes for an effective American hegemony, where US legitimacy as a super power is revitalised by Obama’s cultural diplomacy.

Americans should not forget, after all, that it is precisely this show of soft power that has the likes of NATO’s European leaders supporting the US troop surge in Afghanistan, something that Bush could not garner in all his conservative years. At the end of the day, perhaps all it takes is a little respect to ‘soften’ and resolve even the hardest of issues in US foreign relations.

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