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OBAMA'S SMART RETRENCHMENT: REALISM OR WITHDRAWAL?

Toshihiro Nakayama

- Is there a strategy?
- Accepting the world as it is.
- Limits of U.S. role; abandoning leadership?

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“It reads like an international NGO’s annual report.” This was the feedback from one expert upon perusing the Obama administration’s “National Security Strategy (NSS 2015)” released this past February. Scrutinizing the document provides no clear picture of how the US intends to exercise its power or what it seeks to accomplish. The impression it leaves is one of an Obama administration that sees the US as now having considerably limited ability to accomplish things. In the document’s preface, President Obama himself stresses that what America truly needs now is “strategic patience,” a term quite symbolic of the Obama administration’s basic stance vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

This stance clearly rejects the idea that disorder can somehow be contained if “American primacy” were just restored, and indeed suggests that US overreaction could itself potentially hasten disorder.

In an interview conducted at about that same time, President Obama argued that the world is now facing a collapse of the existing order. Calmly addressing that topic, President Obama continued by insisting that the best the US could do would be to slightly improve matters rather than slightly worsen them. He then stated straightforwardly that this in no way signifies an “American withdrawal” but is rather simply a realistic assessment of how the world currently functions.

When President Obama speaks in this manner, his tone and expressions are by no means those of an idealist. Instead, his is a thoroughly detached perspective. The frequent criticism of President Obama as “naïve” is off-target. President Obama readily and forthrightly acknowledges that the world is uncontrollable and the US’ ability to do things is limited at the moment, and believes that fact should be accepted for what it is; the US should do what it can but absolutely not attempt what it cannot accomplish. The scope of what the US can do should be assessed as narrowly as possible. This approach is not so much retrenchment as realism, or perhaps even better described as a hybrid of the two: “smart retrenchment.” At the very least, President Obama does appear to view the world in this fashion.

The rumblings of another presidential election season can already be clearly heard in the US. The American economy is in an upswing, and fiscal conditions do not appear to be too bad. There has been clear improvement as well in the unemployment rate, the most readily comprehensible economic indicator at election time. The battling for position on social issues that leave Americans confused during each presidential election cycle seems relatively quiet this time. Accordingly, the debate will focus on what to do about the disorder that Obama's foreign policy has permitted and, at least on the Republican side, how to portray a new post-Obama foreign policy approach for the US. The Democrats will find it difficult to distance themselves from Obama's foreign policy, and Hillary Clinton will find this especially so.

In the meantime, President Obama seems intent on adhering to his stance of doing what can be done and refraining from what cannot be done, without too much concern for his legacy. The world was mesmerized when President Obama articulated his vision in Cairo and Prague but, in the seventh year of his presidency, he has adopted a thoroughly restrained realism. This does partially resonate with the American people's mood at the moment, but it differs fundamentally from the role the US has assumed since the start of the 20th century. What Americans think of this will be one of the key points to watch during the upcoming presidential election. 

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