

Has "Cowboy Diplomacy" Really Ended?

By Ehsan Ahrari | July 13, 2006

Time Magazine in its July 8 issue makes a rather bold statement declaring "The end of cowboy diplomacy" of George W. Bush. These type headlines are seen during the slow news season of August or September in Washington when the U.S. Congress is in recess and not much is happening. But there is no lack of high drama right now.

Kim Jong Il's decision to defy the United States by firing a series of missiles has created a mini-crisis in the nation's capital and in East Asia. The next event of high interest is Iran's impending decision of this week about accepting or rejecting the comprehensive package offered by the Perm-5 plus 1 to end its uranium enrichment program. And Israel's incursion into the Gaza strip and southern Lebanon has added more tension on the world stage.

Despite the Administration's decision to give diplomacy a chance in these cases, its special version of cowboy diplomacy lurks in the background. The ultimate litmus test of whether it has ended or not will be seen if the United States makes the decision to opt for diplomacy if Iran rejects the comprehensive diplomatic package.

George W. Bush's presidency will be remembered as much for its swagger and hubris related to its war on terrorism, or even an arguably well-meaning resolve related to the Wilsonian tradition to democratize the world, as for the fact that during his first year in office the transnational terrorists decided to attack the United States on its homeland. It was natural for a sitting president to conduct an aggressive campaign against the perpetrators of that crime in order to eradicate them.

However, the most significant aspect of that declaration was that "war" became the "weapon of first resort," and U.S. foreign policy became defined as a type of "cowboy diplomacy," defined as a shoot first, ask questions later approach.

Aside from a global campaign of hunting down terrorists, Bush purposely began defining the "law of the American Wild West." He declared he wanted Usama Bin Laden, the godfather of al-Qaida, "dead or alive." When American forces came under increased attacks from the Iraqi insurgents, he declared in July 2003, "Bring them on." In addition, he proclaimed, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime." The choice for nation-states of Africa and the Middle East was specified along the following lines: They had to toe the American line on terrorism. No ambiguities or gray areas were to be tolerated.

But the Wild West approach started before the al-Qaida attacks. In the pre-9/11 phase of the Bush presidency, a highly visible preference for the creation of American military superiority was established through such actions as pursuit of



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national missile defense and the abandonment of the ABM Treaty of 1972.

Bob Woodward in, *Bush at War*, wrote, that the American President understood that his actions on global warming and national missile defense during the pre-9/11 phase of his presidency “had rattled U.S. allies in Europe. America’s friends feared the administration was infected with a new strain of unilateralism, a go it alone attitude superpower might be expected to do.”

Bush also appeared to have cherished the world’s apprehension toward him. He told Woodward in an interview, “Look, I’m the toxic Texan, right? In these people’s minds, I’m the new guy. They don’t know who I am. The imagery must be just unbelievable.”

In the post-9/11 phase, a number of highly controversial concepts that were emphasized by The Project for a New American Century were incorporated without any debate. They included seeking America’s military preeminence through unprecedented defense spending, which was in reality a revitalization of the Reaganite approach to the military buildup of the 1980s. There was also an emphasis on the promotion of America’s principles abroad, and on expanding America’s leadership and influence across the globe. These concepts became a rationale for the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein, even though the original stated purpose underlying that action was to deprive him of the weapons of mass destruction that he allegedly possessed.

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However, the real purpose underlying those highfalutin phrases was the open-ended doctrine of regime change defined in President Bush’s speeches and his National Security Strategy plans from 2002 and 2006.

The global community perceived the potential unrestricted aspects of regime change, coupled with the world’s most dominant military power, as evidence of America’s emergence as a self-appointed global judge and sheriff. According to

that perception, the Bush administration was to determine which unpopular regime (or the so-called “rogue states,” or regimes belonging to the so-called “axis of evil”) would be allowed to stay in power and under what conditions. Since no other military power could serve as a deterring force on America’s right to judge and change political order in different regions of the world—a la the Soviet Union during the cold war years—only the American version

of morality and rule of law were to be its ultimate guiding principles.

As the U.S. led the charge into Iraq, the global audience might have felt that they were viewing the real world version of the classic American Western movie of 1952, “High Noon,” with a slight twist. The sheriff in that movie was the lone “good guy” against a gang of lawless thug. In the real version of the High Noon, America was the lone but the most powerful actor deter-

mined to pacify the wild terrorists belonging to the world of Islam and other “renegades.”

Kim Jong Il and the Iranian leaders watched this real life remake of “High Noon” as the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003. They knew he meant every word of his West Point speech of June 2002, when he said, “We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge.” Or when he said in the same speech, “Our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.”

When the lone superpower determines to destroy a regime it does not like, the intended target is not left with much of a choice but to go down fighting despite the gross power asymmetries. Saddam did not take offensive countermeasures while the United States amassed its troops, hoping that the international community or other great powers would save his regime. Kim Jong Il and the Iranian leaders learned the lesson that their strategy ought to be to develop potent counteroffensives, no matter how much risk they encounter in doing so. They also seem to have decided that if their only choice is to go down fighting, they must have nuclear weapons.

It is because of this reality that *Time Magazine* theorizes that cowboy diplomacy is dead. In the case of North Korea the fact that Pyongyang possesses nuclear weapons and its regime might use the Samson option, if attacked has led the U.S. to pursue non-military options. The second

important factor is that Iraq and Afghanistan are not presenting the U.S. much room to maneuver about the use of military option against North Korea. Security situation in Iraq has been a major challenge. Afghanistan is in the process of becoming one. Thus, a decision seems to have been in the inner sanctum of the Bush administration to let the conflict with North Korea be resolved through the use of old-fashioned diplomacy, at least for now.

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enrichment program. That country’s palpable disadvantage is that it does not possess nuclear weapon at this point. However, its greatest advantage is that it can intensify asymmetric warfare both in the Iraqi and Afghan theaters if attacked, a potential about which the White House has to think long and hard before opting for military action against Iran. In this sense, North Korea serves only as a *sui generis* case for the use of diplomacy. It might not be wise to extrapolate that the cowboy diplomacy is indeed dead.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

Ehsan Ahrari, “Has ‘Cowboy Diplomacy’ Really Ended?” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 13, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3361>

Production Information:

Writer: Ehsan Ahrari

Editor: Erik Leaver, IPS

Layout: Erik Leaver, IPS

p. 4

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