

With Friends Like the United States . . .

President Obama has emboldened America's adversaries and unnerved its allies.

By [ELIOT A. COHEN](#)

What do the following have in common: the piling on Israel after the botched interception of the Hamas relief flotilla, the Chinese military telling the U.S. secretary of defense that he was not welcome in Beijing, and the declaration by Nick Clegg—now deputy prime minister of Great Britain—that his country's special relationship with America is over?

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In a 2009 photo. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, left, and Xu Caihou, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, listen to national anthems during a welcome ceremony held at the Pentagon.

Answer: The Obama administration has managed to convince most countries around the world that we are worth little as friends and even less as enemies.

Last week, Israel walked into a trap set by a flotilla of Hamas sympathizers and what Lenin used to call useful idiots. Israeli commandos who were being attacked by burly men trying to throw them overboard or beat them senseless killed a bunch of people whom they would rather not have killed. American forces do the same thing on many occasions when, for example, we use missile-firing drones to support U.S. policies. According to some accounts the recent assassination of al Qaeda No. 3 Sheikh Said al-Masri also killed his wife, three daughters and a granddaughter.

The Israelis have a right to blockade Gaza, from which they withdrew only to soak up several thousand rockets in return, and they did what they could to get the ships to send supplies into Gaza through their ports. Until Vice President Joe Biden plucked up the courage to acknowledge on "Charlie Rose" that the Israelis are at war with Hamas and have the right to prevent arms from entering Gaza, the Israelis could have been forgiven for thinking that we would hang them out to dry. When the U.S. accepted last week, albeit with some tut-tutting, the recent conclusion of the 189-nation nuclear nonproliferation review conference that singles out Israel but does not mention Iran, it was obvious that something is seriously amiss.

The folly here is to think that leaving the Israelis open to these kinds of diplomatic attacks will buy good will in a Middle East that gets its opinions from Al Jazeera and a venomous media that routinely prints outrageous lies and hate literature that echoes Nazi Germany. That part of the world, as Osama bin Laden once correctly observed, prefers a strong horse to a weak horse.

The still greater folly is to think that distancing ourselves from the Israelis will buy us leverage with them. When did the Israelis withdraw from Gaza? When they had a president in the White House upon whom they knew they could count. If, as is the case now, Israel is alone and desperate, is it more or less likely to conclude it has no choice but to attack Iran's nuclear facilities?

The Obama administration has been peculiarly inept at handling allies, to the point that it has jeopardized some of our most important relationships. That a senior British politician would dismiss the pillar of British foreign policy since 1940 is astounding. But Nick Clegg said during the recent British election that the special relationship is over and that the American government understands this even if the British government does not. When asked about relations with the U.S. under President Barack Obama, 17% of Britons in a recent poll thought they had improved; 25% thought they had deteriorated.

The administration refuses out of timidity to advance a free trade agreement with any ally, including Colombia, a success story if only we would claim it. And its quixotic quest for total nuclear disarmament unnerves, among others, our French allies, who want to keep a robust deterrent. These are part of a broader rejection of a world in which the U.S. has real allies that need cultivating and reinforcing.

No less dismaying is Mr. Obama's attitude to U.S. rivals. Its most recent National Security Strategy, issued a month ago, barely acknowledges that such a category exists. The need for the U.S. to balance China in Asia is evident to any moderately alert clerk in the foreign ministry of most Asian countries. Yet such notions are missing from a document that talks a great deal about education policy, economic development and the limits on American power, but very little about geopolitics.

China's snub to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates—its rejection last week of an American request for a visit as he travels to a conference in Singapore—is part of a larger picture. The studied unwillingness of the Chinese even to acknowledge that the North Koreans launched an unprovoked attack on a South Korean naval vessel tells us that they do not think they have to take American anger about anything seriously.

Or take the case of Turkey. The outrageous statements of the Turkish government denouncing Israel for "inhumane state terrorism" toward the Gaza flotilla reflect a broader pattern, going back a number of years, of Turkey's evolution into a country very different from that of 20 or 30 years ago. A combination of Islamist rule, resentment at exclusion from Europe, and a neo-Ottomanist ideology that envisions Turkey as a great power in the Middle East have made Turkey a state that is often plainly hostile not only to Israel but to American aims and interests. The conclusion is sobering—but first one has to recognize the facts for what they are.

There is no penalty for a foreign government crossing this U.S. president—unless you are the hapless prime minister of Israel visiting the White House, in which case, to paraphrase the deli bully in "Seinfeld," "No dinner for you!" The most that a leader like President Lula da Silva of Brazil can expect from doing his best to derail the painfully slow effort to contain Iran is pursed lips.

As for North Korea and Iran, the National Security Strategy threatens them with . . . isolation. North Korea is not already isolated? And Iran is isolated when it has the governments of Turkey and Brazil cozying up to it? What precisely have we gained from reaching out to the Syrian government, whose leaders pocketed our restoration of ambassadorial relations, and in return lessened their ties to Hezbollah and Iran not a wit?

The administration cannot even bring itself to characterize accurately the enemies that it must admit we have. The National Security Strategy declares that we are at war with "Al Qaeda and its affiliates." Islamist extremists? Jihadis? Perish the thought.

Senior officials have repeatedly insisted that they know that radical Islamism runs counter to the authoritative teachings of an altogether peace-loving religion—when the truth is that all religions, including Islam, have within them entirely authentic, deeply rooted, and often sophisticated fanatical streams. This refusal to acknowledge the creed of our enemies is further evidence of a lack of strategic seriousness.

The administration is making a dangerous world even more so. It has announced that it will head for the exits in Afghanistan, that it will not stand by our closest ally, as the Brits discovered when we fastidiously refused to take their side on the latest round of the Falklands dispute. The Israelis should not be the only ones who are worried.

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