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Event report

Obama and the World: One Year Later

With Jean-Marc Coicaud and Tom Farer

Midday Forum

30 March 2010

On 30th March, **UNU-ONY** held a conversation with **Tom Farer**, Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. This discussion centered around some of the ideas explored by Dean Farer in his paper, 'Obama's Foreign Policy: Bridging the Expectations-Capability Gap', recently published in an Italian foreign policy journal.

Dean Farer opened the discussion by explaining that it was more important, and more conceptually complicated, to think about *the way* in which President Obama's foreign policy should be assessed, rather than think about the significance of his chosen stance in relation to particular countries. He discouraged the picking of particular cases such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran and assessing their situation without considering the external circumstances and the momentum of each case in the initial 14 months of Obama's presidency. As Dean Farer put it, 'every foreign policy has deep roots; foreign policy is like an oil tanker: it's hard to shift.... and it depends on the political culture of the country, its institutions and the external environment'. Therefore, it is not useful to just look at issues but rather to define a framework for conceptualizing American foreign policy.

Dean Farer went on to outline three ways of approaching the subject of American foreign policy. The **first approach** proposes that a distinction exists between those political leaders and analysts who search for cooperation and common interests between countries, and those who pursue a more aggressive, expansionist agenda. This second group may be further categorized by the specific ends of their foreign policy:



- **foreign policy as a search for enemies**, represented by those who think of the world as a Hobbesian struggle for power, a continuous process of finding the next enemy;
- **foreign policy as the pursuit of glory**, embodied by political leaders who have consciously or semi-consciously pursued glory as an end in itself; and
- **foreign policy as the pursuit of domination.**

With this distinction in mind, Dean Farer suggested that we are 'at a remarkable juncture' in that 'for the first time in recorded history, all of the major states have far greater interest in cooperation than in competition'. Dean Farer went on to exemplify this difference by recalling two antagonistic positions at the First Hague Peace Conference held in 1899. The first position was held by the United States representative, who said that the time of resolving conflict through force was over; the United States had an interest in trade and cooperation and wanted to move to the compulsory arbitration of disputes among and between states. On the other hand, the German representative opposed that view on the grounds that Germany was the most powerful and influential country in Europe, capable of mobilizing more troops more quickly than any other country and any combination of countries in the region.

Dean Farer then argued that Obama takes the former approach. Obama believes that there are powerful overlapping interests among countries and that 'cooperation can be achieved on the basis of discovered, illuminated and negotiated common interests'. Such a belief was expressed by Obama during his primary campaign where he stated that he was prepared to meet with the leaders of the countries that were considered enemies of the United States.

The second approach offered by Dean Farer was based on insights from an article written by an MIT professor after the Cold War. After surveying the post Cold War literature in foreign policy journals, this investigator concluded that there were four varieties of foreign policy, distinguished by the degree of isolationism they exhibited.



- **Isolationism** (or non-interventionism to use Dean Farer's own term), which posits that the United States should retain powerful military forces but should be indifferent to developments abroad unless there is a direct threat to the country.
- **Offshore balancing**, which consists of letting a natural balance of power develop at the regional level, whether in the presence or absence of conflict. Intervention only occurs when there is a disequilibrium.
- **Multilateral universalism**, which is based on the view that the United States has undeniable interests everywhere and such interests must be protected by all the instruments of power at its disposal. Foreign policy analysts who take this approach believe in both nation-states and multilateral institutions and that their advocates must be prepared to compromise on tactics, strategies and goals.
- **Unilateral universalism**, which is the approach that was followed by the United States during the five years following 9/11.

Finally, the **third approach** to foreign policy suggested by Dean Farer is to think of it in terms of hard power and soft power. When it comes to hard power, the United States invests more in its military and intelligence establishment than the next sixteen to twenty most powerful, military countries. This investment in hard power is a powerful foreign policy statement especially in light of the large disparity between expenditure on hard power versus soft power. Instead of continuing to spend great sums on the Iraq war, Dean Farer suggested that it might be worth considering spending two-thirds of that cost on building and endowing schools for poor and middle-lower class children in nations such as Yemen, Pakistan and Palestine, among others, as a proof of the United States's commitment to soft power.

To conclude his talk, Dean Farer affirmed that in his opinion, Obama believes more in soft power than his predecessors. He recalled some of the actions that led him to win the Nobel Peace Prize: the ban on torture, his commitment to closing Guantanamo, the reference to Iran during his inauguration, his speech in Cairo to the Islam world, his commitment to a two-state solution for Israel-Palestine, and his



decision to stop the deployment of the missile shield in Eastern Europe as a way to reset relations with Russia. Dean Farer brought the talk to a close by expressing his conviction that Obama believes in the possibility of finding common interests with a variety of states.

Question and Answer Session

Questions from participants in this Midday Forum covered a significant range of topics. For instance, a representative from the Permanent Mission of Iran to the United Nations made the point that actions are more important than words. Dean Farer answered that President Obama was hoping that Iran would respond more positively to the US administration, particularly on the nuclear issue. Moreover, he went on to say that Obama wants to reset the relationship with Iran, an assertion supported by the president's education, intellect and knowledge of history.

A representative from an NGO questioned Obama's approach to multilateralism and the United Nations, especially after the president's absence during last June's Conference on the Economic Crisis and his very late entry into the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change. Dean Farer explained that Obama has had tremendous distractions, starting with the US economy and unemployment peaking at 10% or more, an opposition party that wants to 'destroy' him, and the problem of Afghanistan. Despite this complicated agenda, Dean Farer highlighted that Obama has been the first US president to introduce serious legislation to curb American greenhouse gas emissions.

In response to the moderator's question regarding whether there have been significant changes in the allocation of resources in terms of hard and soft power, Dean Farer explained that the Obama administration had actually proposed a surge in the military budget, explained by the deterioration in Afghanistan: a war that was inherited from the previous administration. He noted, however, that there is significant change in how senior figures in the military, such as General Petraeus, perceive soft power and support an increase in resources for that purpose.

The Ambassador of Zambia asked Dean Farer to give an assessment of Obama's policy towards Africa, given that he made no reference to this continent during the talk. Dean Farer explained that he saw an



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overlap between the policies of George W. Bush and Obama in relation to Africa. Indeed, the US has increased the flow of resources to the continent and has placed an emphasis on medical assistance, in particular for HIV/AIDS, as well as for improved governance (openness, pluralism, and corruption reduction). He also mentioned that the message of both presidents was very much focused on development, stability and increased production of public goods in order to make African countries attractive to private investment.

Finally, a UNICRI representative criticized the Obama administration's lack of action in closing Guantanamo. Dean Farer responded that the president had to consider the intensity of the domestic political opposition he would encounter. Moreover, the Guantanamo issue, a very important symbol of soft power, is closely related to matters such as indefinite detention without trial and trial by special military tribunal. Further issues arose when Obama was briefed about the legal and political complexities of convicting dangerous individuals for whom evidence was secured through forms of intelligence that cannot be disclosed.