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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

The Obama Doctrine

On April 28, President Obama and Philippine President Benigno Aquino held a joint news conference in Manila. President Obama's trip was designed to reassure allies that they would indeed have our support when needed. Two situations demonstrate the need for that reassurance.

- The president had publicly drawn "a red line" promising consequences if Syria were to use poison gas against rebels in its civil war. When that line was crossed, the president denied having drawn it in the first place.
- In return for Ukraine giving up its nuclear arsenal after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom pledged to protect Ukraine's territorial integrity. When Russia seized Ukrainian territory earlier this year, the United States and the United Kingdom did essentially nothing.

What, if anything, the United States should have done in the Syrian and Ukrainian situations is open to debate. But what is clear is that the resolve of the president - and, by extension, that of the United States - is in doubt.

In the joint news conference, FoxNews White House Correspondent Ed Henry asked President Obama if he would outline the defining principle or doctrine on which his foreign policy is based. Henry framed his question as a chance for the president to answer "critics who say they think the doctrine is weakness."

The president responded that there wasn't time to fully explain the defining principle of his foreign policy, but then took over seven minutes to address the criticism. This included an imaginary colloquy where he posed and answered questions on what to do in various situations. It was a "straw man" argument in which he painted all critics as war mongers "who would go headlong into a bunch of military adventures." But at least he didn't deny that his foreign policy (if he has one) is under fire.

Acknowledging that the president approved the successful mission to kill Osama bin Laden, and setting aside the Syrian and Ukrainian situations, here's a list of foreign policy achievements that come to mind:

- Insulting our strongest ally by evicting the bust of Winston Churchill from the White House.
- Canceling the missile-shield program in eastern Europe.
- Saying during his 2009 apology tour of Europe that his own nation "has shown arrogance...been dismissive, even derisive."
- Pulling the rug out from under our Egyptian ally in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood.
- Failing to reach a status-of-forces agreement in Iraq, thus facilitating its fall back into chaos.

- Failing to protect our consulate in Tripoli or to avenge the sacking of the consulate and the murder of our ambassador and staff.
- Allowing Iran to continue its march toward a nuclear bomb.
- Insulting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.
- Maintaining a contentious rather than cooperative relationship with Israel.

So against that backdrop, and in light of mounting criticism of what passes for a foreign policy, Henry posed his very benign question. And by-the-way, that criticism is not coming just from the likes of Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, but also from Democrat stalwarts such as Senators Barbara Boxer and Chuck Schumer, and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez. Henry's question: what's the defining principle?

Not having time to simply state his foreign policy's defining principle, President Obama spoke at length about the unfair criticism. In the end, after countering arguments never made, the president had brought listeners no closer to understanding his foreign policy - except that it was not the foreign policy of his trigger-happy predecessor.

Now I'm going to go out on a limb here, and suggest that there are three possible reasons that the president did not accept Henry's invitation to state his defining principle. One is that he has none, and the whole foreign policy is made up on the fly. The second is that there is a defining principle, but he doesn't want to disclose it. The third is that his defining principle is, in fact, so complex that it would have taken more than seven minutes to explain it. Take your choice.

The first possibility is scary. The second is far scarier. The third is downright silly - but it's what he said, and it's surely the least harmful of the three possibilities. So let's accept that option - he just couldn't explain it to us yokels in seven minutes.

In contrast, let's consider the defining principle of a previous president - Ronald Reagan. It didn't take seven minutes to say what his foreign policy doctrine was: peace through strength. And, for good measure, he had a specific succinct policy for the Soviet menace: "we win, they lose." And lose they did, and win we did.

Now that President Obama has pressed the reset button, we find ourselves back in a cold war posture - except that we've lost the trust of our allies and we've emboldened our enemies.

Senator John Barrasso summed it up: "Our enemies don't fear us, our friends don't trust us." Not good.

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Note: My May 7 column had a reference to the "Left Bank." The News erroneously capitalized the word "bank." The intended reference was to those on the political left, not the Paris locations. The News apologizes for causing any confusion.