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NEWS ANALYSIS

## On the World Stage, Obama Issues an Overture

By [HELENE COOPER](#)

LONDON — In his debut on the international stage, [President Obama](#) presented himself as the leader of an America that can no longer go it alone, and as abiding by the protocol of a global new deal.

It was a performance that ranged from mediating behind closed doors — Mr. Obama personally intervened in a spat between the French and Chinese leaders — to a carefully calculated news conference in which he reached deep into history, showed contrition for the failings of Wall Street, and forecast a road the world could no longer travel. Gone are the days, from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana, when Britain and the United States made the rules that others followed.

“If there’s just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a brandy, that’s an easier negotiation,” Mr. Obama said during his hourlong meeting with the international news media, during which he called on reporters from India and China to ask him questions. “But that’s not the world we live in, and it shouldn’t be the world that we live in.”

After more than 11 hours of meetings, Mr. Obama emerged Thursday from his first summit meeting with a handful of modest concrete commitments. He did not get much of what American officials had been hoping for, notably failing to persuade other countries to commit to more fiscal stimulus spending.

But he, along with the other world leaders present, did get a more forceful and detailed blueprint for a global recovery than a similar gathering 86 years ago, when an earlier generation failed to take collective action to counter [the Great Depression](#). “By being willing to accommodate European leaders on the need for better regulation of financial markets and emerging market leaders on their desire to have less protectionism,” said Eswar S. Prasad, a former China division chief at the [International Monetary Fund](#), Mr. Obama “has certainly guided the [G-20](#) leaders to a positive outcome.”

“All in all, not a bad day’s work,” Mr. Prasad added.

Mr. Obama’s own assessment? “Well, I think I did O.K.,” he said, when asked by a reporter during a news conference to rate his performance.

In a premiere diplomatic tour that has already been scrutinized for every blemish, Mr. Obama has, thus far, gotten some not-so-good reviews — several European news outlets complained that he seemed aloof — and some raves. (President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France called him “very helpful.”)

Mr. Sarkozy was referring to Mr. Obama the mediator. For a tense hour on Thursday, Mr. Sarkozy and President [Hu Jintao](#) of China were going back and forth about [tax havens](#). In a large conference room at the Excel Center, surrounded by 18 other world leaders, the two men sniped at each other, according to officials

in the room.

Mr. Sarkozy wanted the big communiqué produced by the Group of 20 to endorse naming and shaming global tax havens, maybe even including Hong Kong and Macao, which are under China's sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Hu was having none of it. He appeared angry that Mr. Sarkozy was effectively accusing China of lax regulation, and that the French leader was asking China to endorse sanctions issued by the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#), a club of wealthy nations that Beijing has yet to join.

According to accounts provided by White House officials and corroborated by European and other officials also in the room, Mr. Obama escorted both men, one at a time, to a corner of the room, to judge the dispute. How about replacing the word "recognize," Mr. Obama suggested, with the word "note?"

The result: "The era of banking secrecy is over," the final communiqué said. "We note that the O.E.C.D. has today published a list of countries assessed by the Global Forum against the international standard for exchange of tax information." Hong Kong and Macao did not appear on the list.

It was not a Middle East peace accord. But Mr. Obama had his first moment as a statesman.

For the news conference that followed, Mr. Obama took pains to project a cheerful, humble image to a world still alternately enraged and befuddled by a financial crisis that originated with American [subprime loans](#). He called on reporters from other countries — "foreign," he said, before adding with a grin that they were foreign only to him. He bantered, dispensing with his propensity to [filibuster](#) and lecture.

Answering a question from a reporter from China, Mr. Obama managed to acknowledge that he had to care most about how American workers and companies were affected by globalization, while still making the argument for why globalization was in America's best interest.

"Look, I'm the president of the United States. I'm not the president of China," Mr. Obama said. Then he added, "It is also my responsibility to lead America into recognizing that its interests, its fate, is tied up with the larger world."

Mr. Obama said that if America neglected or abandoned poor countries, "not only are we depriving ourselves of potential opportunities for markets and economic growth, but ultimately that despair may turn to violence that turns on us."

"Unless we are concerned about the education of all children and not just our children, not only may we be depriving ourselves of the next great scientist who's going to find the next new energy source that saves the planet, but we also may make people around the world much more vulnerable to anti-American propaganda."

In a rare show of emotion from the international press, many in the room stood up and cheered after Mr. Obama was done.

If Mr. Obama gauged that crowd just right, he also had a few gaffes. The Obamas gave Queen Elizabeth II an iPod loaded with songs and videos — this after weeks of [grief from the British press](#) over the 25 DVDs that the couple gave Prime Minister [Gordon Brown](#) of Britain when he visited Washington. (The Browns gave the Obamas an ornate penholder made from the timber of a Victorian antislave ship.)

And [Michelle Obama](#), during the meeting with the queen, [touched her](#), raising already high-brows over on this side of the pond. Buckingham Palace protocol says that commoners must not touch the queen, a dictate that foreign leaders in the past have ignored at their own peril. When Prime Minister Paul Keating of Australia did the same thing back in 1992 the newspapers here called him the “Lizard of Oz.”

But so high is the adulation that has been heaped on the Obamas from the normally caustic British press since their arrival that newspapers here said it was a sign of how well Mrs. Obama got along with the queen. In Mrs. Obama’s defense, the queen did touch her first, putting her arm around her as the two looked down at their feet, presumably talking about shoes.

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