“BAMLET” DITHERS WHILE CHINA TAKES THE SEA

If your neighbor’s house catches fire, is it wiser to call the fire department or to trust the good will of the flames to put themselves out?

Faced with strategic conflagrations scorching much of the globe, President Obama’s approach is to delay as long as possible then to attempt to negotiate with the blaze.

If forced to act at last, he responds to wildfires with a water pistol.

In the administration’s latest weak-loined response to a swelling crisis, Obama belatedly allowed one US Navy destroyer to enter South China Sea waters illegally claimed by Beijing. The intrusion was brief, but China’s senior admiral threatened war. (Don’t worry: We’ll back down.)

What’s at stake? China constructed at least seven artificial islands atop reefs far from its mainland, in waters on which other countries have stronger claims. It’s a hostile takeover of some of the most important sea lanes on the planet, vital in peace and war. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Japan and Taiwan looked to us for leadership.

For years, China built and Obama dithered. For months, he avoided a decision about sending a single ship into the disputed waters to assert our support for freedom of navigation.

At last, Obama chose the mildest response that might serve as a pretense of action — and only to preserve his trade agenda. Our president’s afraid. And the dogs of war smell fear across oceans and continents.

The time to stop China was before they finished building the islands. Now they are entrenched, adding runways and artillery. Only military action could dislodge them now.

This situation has even greater resonance because it fits *the Obama pattern of denial, delay, disarmament and defeat*.

Of those four stages, “disarmament” is the one routinely missed by analysts, who think of disarmament solely in terms of weapons cuts.

But the “strategic disarmament” this White House pursues, the refusal ever to use military force in a timely, effective manner for even the most pressing purposes, is even worse than sharply reducing our forces.

It doesn't matter if we have the world's finest military on paper if the commander in chief employs it too little too late and under such draconian restrictions that it's impossible for our troops to accomplish their missions.

Our military should, indeed, only be deployed as a last resort. But when we send in our troops, we should fight to win. The greatest immorality isn't an accidental strike on a dubious hospital used as a headquarters by barbarian enemies. The greatest immorality is to lose.

So as the president nervously dips a toe in the South China Sea, he's already abandoned plans to retaliate for China's cyberattacks. Instead, he welcomed China's gloating president to a White House tribute of the sort desperate princes used to stage for the emperor they feared.

Obama drew red lines in Syria — in disappearing ink. He denied that Islamic State terrorists were a threat. In Libya, he acted at last — but without a plan for the aftermath (goaded on by a secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, who so despises our military that she preferred to trust local militias for security).

When Putin invaded Crimea, the president and his paladins insisted it "would not stand." Today, Crimea's been gobbled whole by Russia. When Putin invaded eastern Ukraine, that, too, was not to be tolerated. But our president found it tolerable, after all, refusing to provide Ukraine basic weapons essential for self-defense.

After Iran-backed Iraqi militias murdered hundreds and mutilated thousands of American troops in Iraq, Obama's top priority became a worthless deal on Iran's nuclear-weapons program that will only enrich Tehran.

Today, Iran has replaced the US as the dominant foreign power in Iraq (where we control nothing beyond our lavish embassy); Tehran supports the Assad regime's religious cleansing of Sunni Muslims in Syria, intentionally creating refugees in the millions; and our feckless president has not even gotten the release of a single American hostage held by Iran — instead, Iran just arrested another American-passport holder.

And Iran is now a full participant in Secretary John Kerry's Vienna gabfest about Syria's future.

Never before — never — in our history has a president behaved with such self-absorption, self-delusion, fecklessness and irrefutable cowardice.

To find a "president" who did more damage to our country, you'd have to include Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States of America. Of course, the comparison is unfair, since Davis was willing to fight for his beliefs, however misguided.

The best comparison of all is to Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. For act after hand-wringing act,

Hamlet won’t lift a finger (except to drive a hapless girl to suicide). He’s a classic intellectual, forever asking, “To be, or not to be?” Even when the opportunity arises to avenge his father’s murder in a stroke, Hamlet reasons himself out of taking action.

The result? When Hamlet acts at last, it’s far too late. And every principal character dies miserably. Even Mom.

In strategic affairs, some mistakes can be repaired, if at great cost. But time is unforgiving. As with that fire in the house next door, the best time to put it out is right away. A President Hamlet, forever seeing only risks and never opportunities, ends up in a bloodier, more expensive mess than a sober and decisive man of action.

The president is a prisoner of his fears and of vanity that can never admit an error. He’s captive to an ideology that distrusts the United States, and he’s crippled by a deep disdain for our military.

He’s the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time, and our country will need decades to extinguish the strategic fires he’s allowed to burn out of control.

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