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From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, May 17, 2012 9:03 PM
To: H
Subject: FW: USAT - What will Hillary Clinton's diplomatic legacy be?

From: PA Clips [<mailto:paclips@state.gov>]
Sent: Thursday, May 17, 2012 5:50 PM
To: PA-Monitoring-Group-DL
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What will Hillary Clinton's diplomatic legacy be?
USA TODAY
Thursday, May 17, 2012 5:38 PM EDT
By Richard Wolf

She's just come from convincing Chinese leaders to free blind dissident Chen Guangcheng. Soon she'll cajole India's leaders to reduce oil imports from Iran. But at the moment, Hillary Rodham Clinton is renewing old friendships in one of the world's poorest nations.

"Two of my favorite men in the world!" she gushes as she sits down to chat with Muhammed Yunus, a pioneer in providing microcredit to the poor, and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of the world's largest development organization.

This is vintage "Hillary," as the headlines here dub her: part tough-talking diplomat, part back-patting politician. As she prepares to leave the national stage after a 20-year run, Clinton is winning bipartisan respect at home and admiration abroad for her role as the nation's 67th secretary of State.

"You have got a beautiful smile," says Nabila Hossain, 25, a lecturer at American International University here, who nabbed the best front-row seat for one of Clinton's signature town hall events this month. "You're maybe the most influential woman in this world."

How she uses that influence as she approaches 100 countries and 1 million miles — this 18,932-mile jaunt tied her with Madeleine Albright's record 96 countries — is the story of a natural-born politician in diplomat's clothing.

Ah, the clothing. The "Sisterhood of the Traveling Pantsuits," as Clinton calls it, captivates people wherever she goes, along with her changing hairstyles and on-again, off-again glasses. On Page 6, The Telegraph of Kolkata, India, calls her "the most powerful woman in the world." On Page 17, it notes her power is coiled inside "a black pantsuit, finished with white detailing, a white crew neck tee and patent black shoes with an inch of block heel."

At 64, the former first lady and U.S. senator from New York cannot escape the stereotyping she has spent a lifetime combating. Instead, she uses it to make her case for gender equality, one of the paramount causes of her career.

The book on Clinton may not be complete if she tries to become the first secretary of State since James Buchanan in 1856 to win the White House (something she says she will not do). But the chapter on her tenure at Foggy Bottom is largely written, and the reviews are in: Indefatigable. Innovative. And indentured, some say, to a president who has made the major foreign policy decisions himself.

Eight months before her self-imposed retirement, Clinton is piling up awards and accolades faster than clear-cut achievements. She hasn't done anything as momentous as opening the door to China like Henry Kissinger or assembling the first Gulf War coalition like James Baker. Still, the liberation of Libya, establishment of diplomatic ties with Burma and the assembly of a coalition against Iran bear her imprimatur.

Clinton's goal, exemplified in her dealings this month with Chinese President Hu Jintao and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, is to pull allies and even adversaries into more and deeper alliances so that as the world turns, U.S. values and interests are advanced.

"We want a seat at every table that has the potential for being a partnership to solve problems," Clinton said in an interview with USA TODAY. "I think it's a smart but necessary approach in the 21st century, where we are all so networked and where we don't have the luxury of picking and choosing. We have to be engaged everywhere."

Heather Hurlburt, executive director of the National Security Network, credits Clinton with restoring "diplomacy that's so sure-footed, you don't notice."

"That has everything to do with her presence and stature on the one hand, and her sheer doggedness and ability to master her brief on the other," Hurlburt says.

Clinton has done it while dealing with her share of professional and personal complications, from the Arab Spring and the Wikileaks breach of diplomatic correspondence to her mother's death, husband's heart surgery, daughter's wedding and her own broken elbow, which postponed trips to Italy, Greece and Russia.

Americans are supportive: 66% view her favorably in a USA TODAY-Gallup Poll taken May 10-13, the second highest mark in her two-decade Washington career. She's been rated the most admired woman in the world in Gallup polls for 16 of the past 19 years.

What stands between Clinton and the great diplomats of the past, some say, are two things: a landmark accomplishment and a free hand from the White House to carve her place in history.

Perhaps the biggest omission from Clinton's résumé is advancing Middle East peace. "She hasn't picked up the ball, and neither has President Obama," says Diana Buttu, a former legal adviser to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. "To me, it signals that they just don't have a policy any longer when it comes to Israel and the Palestinians."

Clinton defends her all-in approach. "It would be, I think, malpractice to say, 'I'm only working on this thing, and I'm just going to beat it into the ground. Everything else can just wait,'" she said. "Because we just can't wait."

Republican diplomats who served in the Reagan and two Bush administrations have been incredulous that, given Clinton's stature and work ethic, she hasn't been given more free rein. "The president has really wanted to be his own secretary of State," says Elliott Abrams, who served at the State Department and National Security Council during Republican administrations.

Clinton has only the highest praise for her relationship with the president and the White House. "We have intensive discussions," she said. "We don't always agree in the Situation Room, but I think it's quite remarkable we close ranks because we think we're all on the same team."

'A lot of singles'

From her first days on the job, Clinton refused to take the advice she said she received from a predecessor: Don't try to do too much.

"It seemed like a wise admonition, if only it were possible," she said at the time. Her in-box, she said, included two wars, conflict in the Middle East, threats of violent extremism and nuclear proliferation, global recession, climate change,

hunger and disease. Later, she was handed an earthquake in Haiti, a tsunami in Japan and Arab uprisings from Tunisia to Egypt's Tahrir Square.

Her solution: Get the State Department involved in everything. She created an emphasis on economics, insisting that deputies and embassies go to bat for U.S. businesses operating overseas. She started a global counterterrorism forum to boost countries' abilities to fight terrorists. She linked her department to the Pentagon, trading staff members and ideas as part of a "smart power" initiative linking diplomacy, development and defense. She worked to advance Internet freedom around the world and use the latest technologies to aid U.S. diplomacy.

"It's a question of whether you see a lot of singles equaling a home run," says Heather Conley, director of the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "She's had a lot of singles."

Clinton has been perhaps the administration's central player, outlasting many of her counterparts and forging key partnerships with Obama's two Defense secretaries and two national security advisers. She and Obama, once rivals for his job, have meshed as sober, careful and pragmatic policymakers.

Perhaps more than anything else, Clinton has reached beyond heads of state to town halls, local TV, social media, women's groups and the young people who represent more than half the world's population. While working behind the scenes in Beijing for Chen's freedom and before the cameras to advance U.S.-Chinese relations, she took time to attend a "People to People Exchange" session and a demonstration of clean cook stoves to prevent widespread deaths among the world's rural poor.

"You really have no choice," she said about her hectic travel schedule. "Even though we live in the age of so-called virtual reality, where I could do a videoconference with anybody in the world in government, I could even be satellite-beamed into a personal appearance somewhere ... nothing substitutes for showing up."

Dennis Ross, a veteran diplomat who has worked for both Clinton and Obama at the State Department and the White House, cites Clinton's outreach to average citizens as a "signature of her stewardship ... I wouldn't underestimate the impact of that over time."

Foremost among those citizens have been women. Perhaps her best-known speech was delivered as first lady in Beijing in 1995, when she declared, "Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights, once and for all." At State, she established an at-large ambassadorship for global women's issues and the Women in Public Service Project, which works with five women's colleges.

"It is in her DNA," says Claudia Fritsche, Liechtenstein's ambassador to the United States, who attended a recent dinner in Clinton's honor despite representing a country so small that it cannot host the secretary's blue-and-white 757 and entourage. "I have never seen her without passion and compassion on gender issues."

Geographically, Clinton's top achievements have come in Asia. She broke with tradition by traveling there instead of Europe on her first trip in February 2009 to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China. She has been at the forefront of Obama's effort to re-establish the United States as a Pacific power and block China from dominating the important military and economic travel lanes in the South China Sea.

Clinton's historic visit to Burma last December marked the first by a secretary of State since John Foster Dulles in 1955. Kurt Campbell, her assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, recalls the moment when Clinton and Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi finally embraced.

"I've been waiting so long to meet you," Clinton said.

"Me, too," the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner responded.

Clinton played a leading role in Libya, lining up Arab partners for the military effort to oust Moammar Gadhafi and serving as an invaluable intermediary to prevent the coalition from fraying. "Without America's cajoling, hand-holding and occasional arm-twisting, that coalition never would have come together or stayed together," she said recently.

Speaking in Qatar days after the Arab Spring sprang roots in Tunisia in January 2011, Clinton issued a prophetic warning to the region's autocratic leaders. "Those who cling to the status quo may be able to hold back the full impact of their countries' problems for a little while, but not forever," she said. "If leaders don't offer a positive vision and give young people meaningful ways to contribute, others will fill the vacuum."

Even so, she stuck with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak until the end, calling his government "stable" weeks before it collapsed.

Clinton has worked with allies to isolate Iran, economically through tough sanctions and diplomatically at the United Nations. With Obama in 2009, she helped to rescue a Copenhagen summit on climate change from failure, eventually leading to an agreement by developing countries to help reduce carbon emissions. She was instrumental in getting Afghan President Hamid Karzai to accept a runoff election in 2009 that gave him more credibility, but the relationship remains rocky.

'I've lost track of time'

On the road, Clinton combines a diplomat's cool with a mother's warmth. The exhaustion that comes with having traveled 777,721 miles over the equivalent of 70 full days and nights shows only with occasional absent-mindedness. Signing the guest book at Kolkata's Victoria Memorial, she turns to a reporter for help.

"I have no idea what day it is," she says. "I've lost track of time."

Little wonder. Clinton missed an entire Tuesday, flying from Washington to Beijing. She flew on consecutive days to Dhaka, Kolkata, New Delhi and back to Washington. The transcontinental flights were interrupted only by naps in her private suite and tarmac strolls during refueling stops in Alaska, Japan and Germany.

"She seems to be living in an airplane," says Barkha Dutt, a popular TV news anchor at NDTV in New Delhi. "And yet not once does she show signs of any flagging energy."

- In China from May 2-5, Clinton faced a delicate dance: how to negotiate not one, but two successive deals on behalf of Chen, 40, the dissident whose refuge in the U.S. Embassy for six days had drawn howls of protest from Chinese authorities, while participating in the 4th annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue between the world's two most influential nations.

The dueling agendas were on display during meetings with China's top leaders. While Clinton and her counterparts wrestled with trade and security issues and the world's hot spots, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell pounded busily on his Blackberry.

She left with Chen's path to the USA agreed upon but not completed, and pleased that the conference had gone off without a hitch — a sign, she said, of the maturing relationship between the world's largest developed and developing nations.

"We had a very difficult challenge in dealing with Mr. Chen, which was made, I believe, more possible of a positive outcome because we had this other set of activities going simultaneously that both of us, the Chinese and the U.S. sides, were invested in," she said.

- The stop in Bangladesh was "personal," Clinton said, coming 17 years after she and daughter Chelsea first visited in 1995. Her female counterpart, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, put it this way: "Hillary Clinton has been something of a household name in Bangladesh."

That was obvious from the throngs of people standing four to five rows deep along Dhaka's dusty riverbanks and railroad beds. A sign along the motorcade route read, "Heartiest congratulation to our beloved U.S. foreign minister Hillary Clinton."

"We want to see Bangladesh succeed. This is personal for me," she said. "I remember the faces of the men and women I met in the villages."

• In India, Clinton became the first secretary of State to visit Kolkata, but it wasn't her first trip. She had been there in 1997 for Mother Teresa's funeral.

This time, her schedule included a private meeting with the new chief minister for West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, who replaced decades of communist rule. The next day's headline in The Economic Times of New Delhi told it all: "Ego massaged by U.S. secretary of State, Banerjee positive on U.S. investments."

Her stop included an event designed to draw attention to India's problem of sex trafficking, where Clinton donned a green elastic bracelet with the phrase, "Cool Men Don't Buy Sex."

"We're still struggling to make it a mainstream issue," she told representatives of 10 organizations fighting the problem. "It has no place in a modern India."

Clinton was forced to field occasionally hostile questions during the trip. Is the United States anti-Muslim, asked a man in Bangladesh. Why isn't it tougher on Israel, asked a woman in Kolkata. In each instance, she refuted the premise and defended government policies. Israel, she said, must protect itself from Iran — "a regime that has a history of aggressive behavior, and I don't think you deal with aggressors by giving in to them."

More often, the questions focused on her role as a powerful woman and her future plans. In China, Zhou Yuting, 22, a university student fresh from studying abroad in New York City, said Clinton provides "a gentler, milder image" of America than her male counterparts. In India, Hena Gorsia, president of the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce, said, "Whether she breaks through that invisible ceiling in 2016 or not, she's going to leave behind footprints."

Clinton demurred every time the White House was mentioned. "I'm very flattered, but I feel like it's time for me to kind of step off the high wire," she said in Kolkata.

"Well, we hope you change your mind," Dutt interjected — echoing the sentiment expressed a day earlier in Dhaka by Ejaj Ahmed, director of the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center.

"Hopefully the next time you visit Bangladesh," he said, "you'll be on Air Force One."

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