The President's trip

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

From the speeches to the schoolhouse visits, the images from Europe of President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama have been largely symbolic but impressive. In many quarters, Obama attracted large and friendly crowds, contrasting sharply with the sometimes violent protests on the streets of London during the G-20 summit.

Aside from the warm receptions, what actually was achieved on the eight-day, five-nation trip, which also included a NATO summit and a meeting with European Union leaders in the Czech Republic? The short answer is that it is too soon to tell, but a few things are fairly clear.

Certainly, on two of Obama's stated goals, he did not get what he wanted. First, he wanted European leaders to follow the U.S. lead and support further stimulus packages for their economies. French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel were quite vocal in their opposition to this. But G-20 leaders did agree to provide $1.1 trillion to boost financing through the International Monetary Fund and to promote global trade. There also were agreements on new rules for executive bonuses, imposing oversight on various areas of the financial markets, including hedge funds and credit-rating agencies and publishing a blacklist of tax havens.

Interestingly, on the tax havens issue, President Obama scored a victory in personal diplomacy when he mediated a dispute between Sarkozy and Chinese President Hu Jintao.

Bloomberg News reported that Sarkozy wanted to publish a list of tax havens from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The Chinese were against this. Under Obama's deal, the G-20 "would promise action against tax havens, note the OECD list and go no further."

The other disappointing â€” though hardly surprising â€” area was Afghanistan. Obama already has announced that an additional 17,000 U.S. military personnel will be sent there to counter a resurgent al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies, and said he wanted NATO allies to do the same. But the Afghan war lacks public support in most Western European nations, and Obama only secured pledges to send 3,000 more troops to boost security for Afghanistan's Aug. 20 elections, and 2,000 more personnel to train Afghan security forces.

NATO allies also promised to send 300 paramilitary police trainers and provide $600 million to finance the Afghan army and civilian assistance.

Those, however, are short-term issues. A great part of Obama's mission was to begin restoring America's standing with its closest allies, and indications are that he accomplished some of what he hoped to achieve. Even back home in the United States a CNN Opinion Research Poll showed that 79 percent of Americans thought people abroad have begun to view this nation more positively. For the United States, that is no small matter.

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