

## Analysis

# Great expectations or great disappointments?

## Reflections on Obama's foreign policy

Roberta Haar

**When Barack Obama became President of the United States in 2009 Europeans had great expectations for his tenure in the office. In September of that same year, the German Marshall Fund recorded in their annual *Transatlantic Trends* survey that European support for Obama's handling of foreign policy was quadruple the approval given to his predecessor, George W. Bush.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the Dutch and the Germans surveyed had more confidence than Americans did in Obama's ability to deal with troubling international issues ranging from terrorism to Russia to the Middle East. In fact, Europeans said that they trusted Obama to handle difficult issues *more* than they did their own leaders. So, has Obama lived up to European expectations?**

This article considers five transatlantic issues that were important to Europeans in 2009 and reflects on Obama's performance over the last seven plus years. Did Obama fulfill his campaign promises or do Europeans have a right to be disappointed?

### Terrorism

When Obama was sworn in 2009 he inherited two wars in distant lands fighting terrorists, one highly unpopular (Iraq) and the other going badly (Afghanistan). While he was a candidate Obama not only clearly stated that he wanted to get the United States out of both wars but that he also prioritized closing down Guantánamo Bay, believing the prison to be a rallying point for future terrorism. But nearly eight years later the prison remains open and although Obama reduced the 245 detainees that were there when he took office down to 80, his inability to close Guantánamo was an early indicator that he did not like to engage in the messy business of politicking. Speaking about the prison in March 2015, Obama said that when the "politics got tough" he chose "the path of least resistance," which in the case of Guantánamo Bay was "just to leave it open."<sup>2</sup> Certainly Congress has stymied him — for example via legislation prohibiting the executive branch from using public funds to transfer any Guantánamo detainees to facilities inside the United States. But since such laws are very likely unconstitutional, Obama could be more active in fighting Congress to close it. Instead, Obama's latest plan (sent to Congress on 23 February 2016) was so vague that even potential allies rejected it.

On the plus side, no Americans or detainees have been tortured since Obama took office and he shut down American's secret detention centers and allowed the Red Cross to visit non-secret ones. But by not dealing with the final detainees at Guantánamo Bay before he exits office, Obama leaves in place a precedent that is directly at odds with America's core rule-of-law principles.

*The war going badly*

As a candidate Obama said that he wanted to focus on the lawless tribal region along the Afghan-Pakistani border because he believed that it was the epicenter of the worldwide terrorist threat. Surprisingly, Obama was in some respects more hawkish than Republican candidate John McCain in his campaign statements on how he would combat terrorist threats in the region. For example, he said that he would engage in military strikes against targets inside Pakistan (which, of course, he actually carried out when he went after Osama bin Laden in May 2011). Undoubtedly, this very early statement (in August 2007) that he was willing to strike inside the territory of other states made it clear that he was not afraid to use America's military arsenal in waging the fight against terrorism.

But his use of this arsenal would be in smaller increments applied in many more locations. Over the course of his presidency Obama has presided over several hundred "targeted strikes," mostly using unmanned aerial vehicles (drones). These strikes have caused the deaths of several thousand people in half a dozen countries (Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Mali, Libya, Iraq and Syria). However, administration officials refuse to acknowledge most of the strikes or offer a public account of the evidence that led to the targeting of specific individuals. As Rosa Brooks argued in *Foreign Policy*: "the US government has secretly killed a large number of human beings (thousands, not hundreds), for secret reasons, based on secret evidence evaluated by largely anonymous individuals in a secret process. That's not a legacy any American president should want."<sup>3</sup>

It is also problematic that Obama's authorization to use military force against terrorists today is the same authorization that Congress gave Bush after 9/11. As Brooks points out, the 2001 authorization "clearly was not intended to authorize a forever war against a perpetually changing list of bad guys." But, has the stretching of the authorization to wage war actually resulted in winning the war against the bad guys, in particular against the terrorists in Afghanistan?

### *Obama's Afghan legacy*

Despite the fact that as a candidate Obama called the Afghan war "the good war" and that he believed it was under-resourced, after nearly two terms as the Commander in Chief in charge of forces fighting there, the situation in Afghanistan is little better than when he took office. Problems include high levels of corruption and an entrenched war economy, which leads to a constant renewal of conflict. A February 2016 report by *Transparency International* highlighted the fact that 15 years after the US invaded Afghanistan, with billions of dollars spent and thousands of American lives lost, the country remains profoundly corrupt.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a recent *New York Times* article highlighted the war economy when it reported that the Taliban is now a full-blown drug cartel.<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan's most recent setback is that ISIS has arrived, ratcheting up the stakes in this war-torn region.

Obama's newest commander, General John Campbell, appeared before the House Armed Services Committee in February 2016 to underscore that Afghan shortfalls, such as the uneven performance of the Afghan forces themselves in fighting the Taliban, will persist well beyond 2016. General Campbell informed the committee that Afghanistan had "not yet achieved an enduring level of security and stability that justifies a reduction" in US military support for the foreseeable future.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, rather than bringing about a US withdrawal

from Afghanistan, Obama will leave office presiding over a substantial military presence in the region and no clear success in sight.

### *The highly unpopular war*

What about that the other war that the US was fighting when Obama took office in 2009 — the one fighting terrorists in Iraq? Unfortunately, Obama's complete withdrawal from Iraq created a vacuum that Iran filled through its Iraqi Shiite clients and whose anti-Sunni policies provided the impetus for the eventual emergence of the Islamic State. This means terrorism in Iraq morphed into fighting various offshoots and groups, whose members recaptured parts of Iraq and spread to northern sections of Syria. These facts on the ground created strange bedfellows in the fight against Islamic State. For example, the US shared tactical objectives with Russia, Iran and Hezbollah and American warplanes bombed targets in Iraq in support of the Iranian forces helping their Iraqi counterparts.

Facts on the ground also point to an Obama administration that has been caught off guard by the rise of Islamic State and its affiliates in the Middle East. Being caught unprepared, in turn, led to improvised policy that lacks direction and ultimately leaves the Middle East no better off than when Obama took office. The resurgence of terrorism in Iraq and its spread in the region also has profound implications for the next three topics.

### **Iran**

In the reflections on Obama's legacy, Iran is placed on Obama's accomplishment list because of the 2015 nuclear deal that he brokered with the Islamic Republic. For instance, David Rothkopf, the editor of *Foreign Policy*, said that the Iran deal would almost certainly become *the centerpiece* of Obama's foreign-policy legacy.<sup>7</sup> In fact, how to deal with Iran was one of the most intensely discussed foreign policy topics in the 2008 campaign and one that Obama identified with early on. Both candidates expressed concern about Iran's anti-Israeli rhetoric, its role in Iraq, its apparent nuclear ambitions and its support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. Like George W. Bush, Obama pledged to use all instruments of US power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, which is further evidenced by his efforts to build an international consensus for employing multilateral sanctions. Not only did Europeans, who get a significant portion of their petroleum from Iran, support UNSC Resolution 1929, but Obama convinced the Russians and the Chinese to support it too. David E. Sanger wrote in the *New York Times*, "The economic sanctions Mr. Obama has imposed have been far more crippling to the Iranian economy than anything President Bush did."<sup>8</sup> Obama also moved significant military reinforcements into the Persian Gulf. These measures produced the landmark nuclear deal that Tehran signed in July 2015 with the US and five other states.

Although it continues to abide by the nuclear accord, in recent months Tehran began flouting its ballistic missiles and arms imports while at the same time expanding its support for militants in the region, even sending special-forces military units to help the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. In helping Assad these Iranian forces are working closely with Russian warplanes. In 2015, Russia further announced that it would sell sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles to Iran, which may help shield Iran's nuclear facilities from any future airstrikes.

The Islamic Republic also continues to support Shia Houthis against Saudi-backed forces in Yemen. Continued belligerent behavior on the part of Iran means that worries are growing that the nuclear deal Obama brokered may have ceded too much to Iran and lets it continue to engage in destabilizing activities. But Iran is not the only destabilizing power in the region — in fact, Russia brokered a “marriage of opportunity”<sup>9</sup> with Iran in order to block American efforts to shape the Middle East.

## **Russia**

Before Russia’s invasion of Georgia in August 2008, Obama had a rather conciliatory tone towards Russia and spoke about areas of potential cooperation, such as nuclear disarmament and policies towards Kosovo and Iran. He and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton famously called for a “reset button” to be pushed in order to reduce tensions between the two. During the violence of the 2008 Georgian invasion and immediately after it Obama was hesitant to blame either country. This was a radically different response to McCain’s, who wanted to eject Russia from the G-8 and mocked Bush’s statement that he saw good in Putin (McCain saw one thing in Putin’s eyes: the KGB). Polls at the time showed that Americans preferred McCain’s stance against Russia and soon Obama also toughened his approach to the conflict, blaming Russia for invading its neighbor.

Yet not long after the 2008 invasion of Georgia, in December 2009, Obama decided to make a mollifying gesture to Russia by rethinking the anti-ballistic missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. Putin seems to have combined this conciliation with Obama’s evasion to punish Assad for the use of chemical weapons in August 2013 and Obama’s non-response to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 as an opportunity for him to abdicate his responsibilities with the Budapest Memorandum, which guaranteed Ukraine’s territorial integrity in exchange for Ukraine giving up what was then the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Abdicating his responsibilities for the Budapest Memorandum provided the cover Putin needed to invade Eastern Ukraine.

Putin’s decision to support Assad in Syria further strained US-Russian relations, with Obama, once again, resorting to the path of least resistance. Obama’s inability to deal with opportunistic leaders like Putin will go down as one of his foreign policy shortcomings. Although it is true that today the Russian economy is in bad shape, this state of affairs has less to do with the relatively weak sanctions against Russia and more to do with the precipitous fall, starting in 2014, of oil prices. The puzzle of whether it is good for the globe to have a strong or weak Russia will not be solved before Obama leaves office. What will endure into the next presidency is that NATO will try to show enough force to warn Russia away from threatening alliance members, which leads to the next topic.

## **NATO**

Obama’s campaign views on NATO sounded quite George W. Bush-like. Obama at various times in the campaign discussed the need to reinforce the NATO operation in Afghanistan as well as the importance of success there for the alliance. For example, in 2008 in Berlin he told the huge crowd that came to see him that he wanted to see NATO’s first mission beyond Europe a success.<sup>10</sup> To bring that about he said that European allies needed to remove national caveats restricting where troops can be deployed. However, Obama soon

discovered that his popularity in NATO's European member states did not translate into much more help in implementing the Afghan operation. The problem was that some allies had little more to give and others were leery of domestic opposition to casualties or even war.

Also in line with Bush-like thinking, candidate Obama moved to support NATO membership for both Georgia and Ukraine (a policy that was not in line with European thinking). Obama also said that Russia would not have a veto on NATO expansion. In 2009, Obama also understood that the armed forces of many of the European members of NATO were in a weak state and that any defense of Europe would still wholly depend on American involvement. To counter this fact, Obama demanded that NATO draw up contingency plans that outlined tasks for all NATO members if the need to defend Europe should arise. But Germany and Italy blocked such plans.

While it is true that in the early part of Obama's tenure in office attacks on any part of Europe were remote, more recently Russian aggressive behavior in Europe's east as well as in the Middle East shifted Obama's position on Europe's vulnerability. As a result, Obama's 2017 defense budget requested \$3.4 billion to position American heavy weapons and armor, along with several thousand troops, in NATO's Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>11</sup> Administration officials said the additional NATO forces were calculated to send a signal to Putin that the West remained deeply suspicious of his motives in the region. Support of NATO has clearly been placed on Obama's more urgent agenda, while the last topic, climate change, is one that he has long believed "is a potential existential threat to the entire world."<sup>12</sup>

### **Climate change**

After winning the Democratic primaries in June 2008, candidate Obama said, "This is the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow, and our planet began to heal."<sup>13</sup> Such soaring rhetoric on the subject clearly indicated that it was an important issue for him. There is also an argument to be made that along with Iran, the Paris climate change accord can be placed on Obama's accomplishment list. In November 2015, he also stopped the Keystone pipeline, which was the first time a world leader had rejected a big project because of its effect on the climate.

But as an issue, combating climate change has not been smooth sailing and Obama has not always adhered to his own rhetoric. For instance, in 2009 Obama promoted coal-to-liquid fuels, which produce nearly twice as much greenhouse gases as ordinary petroleum. Candidate Obama also said that he would boost corn-based ethanol subsidies (although corn-based ethanol also increases greenhouse gases) because Illinois (his home state) and Iowa (the first caucus) are major corn producers. John McCain and Ted Cruz are two of the few candidates who have not pandered to Iowa corn farmers.

Early in his administration EU officials were also alarmed that Obama had burned up his political capital on health care reform in the US without getting Congress to pass binding emissions targets before the Copenhagen Climate summit in 2009. It was not until 2014, a year before the Paris Climate summit, that Obama finally travelled to Beijing to broker a climate partnership with China — a G-2 agreement of the world's 2 biggest emitters of CO<sub>2</sub>.

It helped that in the run-up to Paris, American and EU positions moved closer together: both had high ambitions for a strong, enduring climate agreement.

Obama's goals of protecting Democratic domestic energy policy and for a climate victory to secure his legacy as an internationalist capable of strengthening international norms in the area of climate change, also helped bring about the deal in Paris. But since 2015 was the hottest year ever recorded (climatologists called 2015 shocking because it smashed the previous records by such large margins), and climate change is the result of cumulative emissions of carbon dioxide, major challenges associated with climate change will remain for the foreseeable future and well beyond the Obama presidency.

### **Obama on balance**

In 2014, the German Marshall Fund's *Transatlantic Trends* opinion poll revealed a staggering drop in German approval of Obama while across Europe support for greater independence in the transatlantic relationship rose.<sup>14</sup> Europeans and Germans in particular were gravely disappointed in the Obama presidency. Still, any president that came into office with attractiveness comparable to John F. Kennedy's popularity in Europe was bound to encounter difficulties in maintaining that popularity. Those who were captivated by Obama's message of hope and change were always going to be disappointed by the reality of business in Washington. The fact is that the office of the president does not give its holders a tremendous range of policy-making capability. Although it may appear that this man is the most powerful in the world, he must deal with a fickle public and an opinionated Congress that sometimes feels like it contains 535 mavericks.

Around Thanksgiving last year, Stephen Walt, a well-known foreign policy realist, wrote that Americans should be thankful that Barack Obama was president the last 7 years because "on balance he has done a commendable job in challenging circumstances. He has led the country in a calm and deliberate manner, which is precisely what the job demands. The last thing the United States needs is a hair-trigger or panic-prone president, and Obama has been anything but that. You needn't have voted for him to acknowledge that he's accomplished a great deal of good. Whoever wins in 2016 will be lucky to do as well."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, we may miss Obama all too soon, especially if in 2016 America gets a hair-trigger or panic-prone president as his successor.

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<sup>1</sup> *Transatlantic Trends Key Findings 2009*, [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org).

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the City Club of Cleveland," 18 March 2015, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

<sup>3</sup> Rosa Brooks, "Obama: The Last Year and the Legacy, Part 1," 13 January 2016, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>4</sup> "How to Tackle Corruption in Afghanistan: New Report 17 February 2016," [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org).

<sup>5</sup> Azam Ahmed, "Penetrating Every Stage of Afghan Opium Chain, Taliban Become a Cartel," 16 February 2016, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>6</sup> General John Campbell, "Opening Remarks," 2 February 2016, [www.armedservices.house.gov](http://www.armedservices.house.gov).

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<sup>7</sup> David Rothkopf, "President Obama Is Wrong—The Iran Deal is Transformational," 20 July 2015, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>8</sup> David E. Sanger, "Is there a Romney Doctrine?" 12 May 2012, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>9</sup> Karoun Demirjian, "Russian-Iran relationship is a marriage of opportunity," 18 April 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama, "A World That Stand as One," 24 July 2008, [www.my.barackobama.com](http://www.my.barackobama.com).

<sup>11</sup> The President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2017, Office of Management and Budget, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," April 2016, [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com).

<sup>13</sup> Barack Obama, "Transcript Remarks in St. Paul," 3 June 2008, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>14</sup> *Transatlantic Trends Key Findings 2014*, [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The Top Ten Things Americans Should (Still) Be Grateful for in 2015," 25 November 2015, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).