

The pragmatic president

Obama's second term foreign policy

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With the ratification of the New START Treaty, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq and the death of Osama bin Laden, President Obama accomplished several of his foreign policy objectives in his first four years. This article addresses the three main foreign policy priorities the re-elected Obama faces in his second term.

The first principal concern entails the multifaceted challenges emerging from the Greater Middle East, in particular continuing the fight against Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Obama's second priority relates to China's rise as a regional power while the third involves stabilizing America's place in the world economy, especially ensuring that the European Union does not break up and that Europe remains an important trade partner.

Fighting with sanctions and drones

Obama took office four years ago with an ambitious plan to reduce the antagonisms between the U.S. and the Muslim world. He intended to reach out to America's enemies with an open hand rather than a clenched fist. However, Obama's policy did not succeed and by the end of his first term he shifted strategy toward sanctions for Iran and a preemptive targeted killing approach against militant Islamists, authorizing far more drone strikes on terrorists than his predecessor George W. Bush had endorsed. Even though he emphasized a conciliatory policy toward Iran, from the beginning of his presidency Obama had also been exploring how sanctions would affect the regime's willingness to curb its nuclear weapons program. Thus when his outstretched hand was rebuffed, Obama moved to prioritize sticks over carrots. One of his first initiatives in this direction was to make stopping Iran's nuclear program a high priority in discussions with allies in Europe and with governments in Russia and China. The joint statement that Obama made with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in September 2009 at the Pittsburgh G-20 Conference certainly was designed to send a clear message to Iran that Obama's tactics were shifting and that America and its allies were in sync.¹ When negotiations broke down with the Iranians, Obama made his change in policy complete with a decision to support the Iranian opposition and a move towards enacting internationally-enforced sanctions through the UN Security Council. Obama convinced the Russians and the Chinese to support these sanctions, which remain in place today and for the foreseeable future.

With regards to Obama's preemptive targeted killing strategy, like Bush's before him, it is based on the idea that imminent attacks justify a response. While Bush used preemption to validate full-scale military invasion, Obama uses it to defend killing specific individuals. Over his first four years in office, Obama expanded the program to Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. In his second term the program is likely expanding to Mali and Libya. Drone strikes have also controversially killed a member

of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Anwar al-Awlaki, who was an American. Although al-Awlaki was linked to the 2009 attack at Fort Hood, Texas, in which twelve U.S. soldiers were killed, and he directed the underwear bomber's plot to explode a plane over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, the deliberate killing of an American citizen still raised legal and moral dilemmas for the Obama administration.

Despite the moral questions, Obama is likely to continue his intense use of drones in his second term because the decision to use them is multidimensional, the first being financial. Bush's military interventions had clearly ignored costs. Brown University 'Costs of War Report 2011' calculated that the expenditures since 2001 in Afghanistan and Iraq amounted to \$2.3 trillion and over 6,000 American lives.² At present it costs \$250,000 a year to keep one American soldier in Afghanistan.³ Disregarding the expenditure of foreign policy is a practice that Obama is unable to follow. In fact, Obama not only stated in his first term that he refused to set foreign policy goals that exceeded America's means but he and his Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta propose to cut the U.S. defense budget by \$487 billion over ten years.⁴ Such actions certainly point to a more circumspect attitude toward costly foreign policy adventures in his second term and a continued reliance on drones, which are much cheaper by comparison to committing soldiers abroad.

Another reason why Obama will continue to use drone strikes is because Republicans have sought to depict him as weak on terrorism. The Navy Seals strike against Osama bin Laden has made this characterization harder to sell, but Obama's emphasis on his efforts at protecting national security in the third presidential debate clearly illustrate that he does not want the decades old stereotype that Democrats are weak on defense issues to apply to him.

The decision to use drones is also a response to domestic pressure to bring the boys home from Afghanistan as soon as possible. In his first two years Obama tried to combine an expanded use of drone attacks with General David Petraeus' counterinsurgency strategy (COIN), which had worked so well to improve the situation in Iraq. The COIN doctrine specifies waging war against insurgents by protecting the local population and developing close ties with them. Unfortunately, counterinsurgency also requires many boots on the ground; Obama complied by announcing in December 2009 that he would send a surge of additional troop deployments to Afghanistan. But his surge came with clear deadlines for when the troops would come home, whether they had succeeded or not. Such limits undoubtedly reflect domestic views. Pew Research polls in June 2011 revealed that 56% of Americans wanted troops to return home quickly from Afghanistan and not wait for the situation there to stabilize.⁵ More recent polls indicate some two-thirds of Americans think that soldiers in Afghanistan should come home.⁶ Americans also appear willing to let drones take the place of returning soldiers. The fact that drone attacks are more discriminating with whom they target adds to their relative popularity with the American public. This further contributes to the likelihood that Obama will continue to rely on drones.

The pragmatic use of force

Obama's use of force in the Libyan intervention showed that he clearly understood the current American frame of mind pertaining to sending troops abroad. After Republicans ridiculed the unfortunate "leading from behind" phrase, Obama nevertheless further accentuated the point that America's involvement in the war was minimal. So minimal in fact that it did not fall under the provisions of the War Powers Resolution, which necessitates that presidents ask Congress permission if hostilities last longer than 90 days.⁷ Obama further clearly stated that he sees the Libyan intercession exemplifying his intervention strategy vis-à-vis future humanitarian crises. In the last of the debates with Romney, Obama said that Libya was an example of how his administration makes choices — carefully, thoughtfully and making certain that the opposition forces that it deals with are moderate and will be friendly to the U.S. over the long-term. In the case of Syria both candidates were explicit in their remarks that neither wanted to commit American troops. Obama's approach to intervention in Libya coupled with his remarks on the crisis in Syria, indicate that despite his rhetoric that the U.S. has a moral obligation to prevent humanitarian catastrophes, he is careful how he deploys the U.S. military.

Obama will also continue his policy of cautious pragmatism with challenges emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, this policy may create negative long-term results. This is because Obama's counterterrorism tactics produce high levels of anti-Americanism that ultimately lead to further radicalization or Talibanization in the tribal areas of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. Talibanization has resulted in as many as 24 jihadi groups forming, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is the largest group and most recognized because it carried out the terror attacks in Mumbai, India, in November 2008. The rise of such groups undermines the notion that drone attacks will continue to support U.S. interests in the future and may necessitate a reconsideration of current policy. Obama's shift from COIN to a counterterrorism strategy also further weakens the assurance that America is in Afghanistan for the long haul. Relations are further complicated by the fact that Democrats and the Obama administration have had a difficult relationship with the inept Afghan President Hamid Karzai and question whether he is a reliable partner.

Interactions with Afghanistan are further complicated by U.S. relations with Pakistan. Unfortunately the strategic partnership with Pakistan is riddled with mistrust and hostility. In the past when America's strategic priorities changed the U.S.-Pakistani alliance of convenience could turn antagonistic, as it did in 1985 after the end of the Afghan war. While the Pakistanis are wary of U.S. future intentions, the Americans worry that the Pakistanis are untrustworthy allies in the fight against terrorism. Although in response to Obama's urging the Pakistani Army sent as many as 140,000 troops to the tribal areas, the Army refuses to go after the Haqqani insurgent group's base in North Waziristan. In September 2012 Congress added the Haqqani network to the U.S. State Department's terrorism blacklist because it is responsible for some of the deadliest attacks on U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The Pakistani Army's continued support of Islamic jihadists will force Obama to put more strings on military and economic aid to Pakistan, further adding fuel to Pakistan's

abandonment fears. Additionally, Congress will continue to put pressure on Obama, for example, by threatening to designate Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism.

In addition to questioning Pakistan's trustworthiness, Obama is worried about its political stability. America has long desired to stop Pakistan from building a nuclear capability but now that it has one, Obama worries that political instability might result in material or bombs falling into the hands of terrorists. In his June 2012 book *Confront and Conceal*, David Sanger argues that America only continues in Afghanistan because of its fears and strategic interests in Pakistan. Sanger recounts Obama telling his staff in late 2011 that his chief national security concern was that Pakistan would crumble making its nuclear weapons and fissile material vulnerable to Al Qaeda or other militant groups, who are known to be desperate to get their hands on anything nuclear. Several known sites linked to the Pakistani nuclear program have already been targeted by Islamist militant attacks. Although America has already given hundreds of millions of dollars to keep Pakistan's weapons safe, after Osama bin Laden was killed Pakistani officials paradoxically viewed the U.S. as the chief threat to their arsenal and moved to hide various components around Pakistan.

The pivot toward Asia

Challenges emerging from the Asia-Pacific will be some of the most difficult for the second term Obama administration. Aggressive territorial claims by China in the South China Sea fuel concerns about China's regional role — will a rising China be disruptive or will China become a responsible world power, continuing with Hu Jintao-era ideas of peaceful development? Unlike presidential candidates before him, who used tough talk on China to appeal to voters, Obama tried to avoid belligerent language in relation to China in his first campaign. Once in office, in a move similar to his ambitious plan to reduce the antagonisms between the U.S. and the Muslim world, Obama started with a plan to reduce the American confrontational stance toward China. However, it did not take long for Obama to realize that his policy of accommodation was in fact emboldening Chinese bellicose behavior. This was in part because by the time Obama took office the world had changed. The costs of Bush's military interventions when combined with his underfunded domestic expenditures and the necessary stimulus after the 2008-2009 financial crises resulted in the U.S. becoming the world largest debtor. China was not only a key holder of American debt but had in the recent past (2006) overtaken Japan as the world's second-largest economy. These shifts in economic power meant that Chinese officials projected an air of ascendancy in their meetings with their American counterparts and intellectuals in China contemplated the finer points of U.S. declinism theory. In such an atmosphere Obama's policy of minimizing conflict was interpreted by the Chinese as an affirmation of American decline.

The December 2009 conference on climate change (at which the various slights perpetrated by the Chinese became downright insulting to Obama personally) marked the boundary of Obama's conciliatory policy. Soon after, in January 2012, Obama approved a new sale of weapons to Taiwan and generally toughened his policy towards China. In a very public way Obama moved to build up America's

military presence in the region as well as strengthen defense cooperation with allies. The latter was partly in response to countries in the region requesting that the U.S. reassert its role as a power-balancer. Obama's toughened policy stance was in further evidence in the final of the three presidential debates in which he said that China was a potential partner but that he would insist that it plays by the rules, especially when it comes to international trade. Ensuring that China adheres to international rules and norms is complicated by the fact that China is going through its own leadership transition and there are general concerns about whether the new leadership will be able to maintain control over China's independently-minded nationalistic generals, its corrupt and avaricious ministers and its growing corporate enterprises.

Stabilizing economies and rebuilding partnerships

Europeans worried about their relevancy after Obama announced his pivot to Asia in 2011. The election campaign also largely ignored relations with Europe as a topic, leading some in Europe to argue after Obama won that it was time for Europe to step up its game.⁸ However, Europe remains essential to America's ability to stabilize the world economy and especially for its own financial recovery. In the summer of 2012 Obama explicitly said that he was worried about Europe's recovery from its own debt crisis. He made his remarks soon after a dismal U.S. jobs report heightened concerns about the impact of Europe's predicament on U.S. growth. Obama emphasized that pro-growth policies need to be part of Europe's plan to deal with its crisis in addition to austerity tactics. Obama said that if Europe goes into a recession it "means we're selling fewer goods, fewer services, and that is going to have some impact on the pace of our recovery."⁹ He urged EU member states to keep Greece in the Eurozone and sent his Secretary of the Treasury Tim Geithner to meet with European leaders seventeen times. In particular, Obama has focused attention on Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been less flexible on relaxing austerity approaches, and the UK's David Cameron, who made clear when he rejected tighter EU controls that did not include special guarantees for Britain's financial sector in December 2011 that he is weighing-up the pros and cons of remaining in the EU. Obama clearly sees a fragmenting European Union as a threat to international economic security as a whole and that a well-functioning European internal market is beneficial to American interests.

Thus, Obama's second term will not neglect the EU-U.S. economic relationship, which is the most substantial economic partnership in the world in terms of trade (including services) and foreign direct investment. European companies are the leading foreign investors in the U.S., with Great Britain, Germany, France and the Netherlands being the top four sources of jobs created by foreign investment in America. In turn, American companies invest far more in EU countries than in Asian ones. In fact, U.S. investment in just the Netherlands is nine times more than U.S. investment in China.¹⁰ A 2009 Commission study found that the transatlantic economy has even more potential. The report concluded that roughly 50% of non-tariff measures and regulatory divergence could be eliminated resulting in an increased Gross Domestic Product of €163 billion in 2018.¹¹ In order to bring about a recovery of the U.S. economy as well as improve the world's economy, Obama will

seriously consider ways in which to renew the transatlantic economic relationship and help Europe emerge from its current crisis.

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