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## Barack Obama Was a Foreign-Policy Failure

**The 44th president of the United States promised to bring change but mostly drove the country deeper into a ditch.**

Stephen M. Walt

January 18, 2017

began writing this column (originally in the form of a blog) in 2009, at the very beginning of Barack Obama's presidency. His election filled me with both hope and trepidation: I admired his eloquence and visible intelligence, and I shared some of his foreign-policy instincts, but my early columns also expressed misgivings about his overly ambitious foreign-policy agenda.

Now, in his final week in office, it's only natural to take a look back and offer an assessment. And when it comes to foreign policy, I regret to say my verdict is not particularly favorable.

Let's start with the positive side of the ledger. Here one must begin by recalling the dire circumstances when Obama took office. The world economy was in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, and the United States was teetering on the brink of a complete economic meltdown. Unemployment was soaring, and millions of Americans were losing their homes to foreclosures. The United States was mired in two unwinnable wars, Osama bin Laden was still at large, and America's image in many parts of the world was at historic lows.

What has happened since? Here at home, the U.S. economy recovered faster than any of the other major industrial democracies, we're now at full employment, and the deficits that resulted

from the 2009 bailouts and stimulus package have shrunk dramatically. Wall Street was at near-record levels even before the recent post-election surge. More than 20 million Americans who lacked health care coverage now have it (for the moment), and we have seen important progress on civil rights for gay Americans and some other minorities. Moreover, Obama managed these important economic and social achievements in the face of extraordinary opposition from the Republican Party, which seemed more interested in thwarting Obama than in doing anything to help the American people.

In foreign policy, the Obama administration successfully negotiated a deal that halted Iran's progress toward a nuclear weapon. He fulfilled the George W. Bush administration's plan to get U.S. troops out of Iraq and significantly reduced the U.S. role in Afghanistan. Bin Laden was found and eliminated on his watch. The Paris agreement was an important step forward on climate change, and the pivot to Asia began a much-needed reorientation of America's strategic focus. Ending the spiteful and counterproductive ostracism of Cuba was equally overdue and will do more for the Cuban people than our lame-brained embargo ever did.

In both foreign and domestic policy, therefore, this administration notched some genuine wins. And throughout his presidency, Obama conducted himself with the same dignity, humor, grace, intelligence, forbearance, respect for American values and traditions, and above all *class* that were on display in his farewell speech. Contrast that with the tone of Donald Trump's first post-election press conference, held the day after Obama's speech, which was bombastic, deceptive, abusive, defiant, contemptuous of traditional norms — and entirely consistent with Trump's campaign and business career. (If you think Jan. 20 isn't a watershed moment for political leadership, think again.) No matter how petty or two-faced his opponents were, Obama rarely paid them back in kind. One suspects Americans will appreciate these qualities even more as Trump's egomaniacal circus act wears thin and his plutocratic policies leave his working-class supporters out in the cold.

Yet Obama's presidency is in other respects a tragedy — and especially when it comes to foreign policy. It is a tragedy because Obama had the opportunity to refashion America's role in the world, and at times he seemed to want to do just that. The crisis of 2008-2009 was the ideal moment to abandon the failed strategy of liberal hegemony that the United States had been pursuing since the end of the Cold War, but in the end Obama never broke with that familiar but failed approach. The result was a legacy of foreign-policy missteps that helped propel Donald Trump into the White House.

For starters, Obama was persuaded to escalate the war in Afghanistan in 2009, in a pointless "surge" that was doomed to fail and did. Instead of acknowledging that U.S. interests were minimal and the war was unwinnable, his policies prolonged U.S. involvement to no good purpose and ate up a lot of his time and attention. He also decided to embrace and expand many aspects of the Bush administration's approach to the "war on terror," especially the use of drones and special operations forces to chase down suspected terrorists all over the world. He rightly banned torture — which is both ineffective and illegal — but otherwise let U.S. intelligence agencies off the hook for their past excesses and did little to rein them in when they overstepped on his watch, as the CIA did when it repeatedly tried to interfere with Senate investigations of the so-called torture regime. Meanwhile, his administration prosecuted whistleblowers and

journalists with more vigor than any of his predecessors. The result? The United States is conducting counterterrorism operations in more places than ever before, albeit without apparent success, and Donald Trump has inherited a set of tools he can use to suppress honest reporting if he wishes. Any bets on what he's likely to do?

Second, Obama and his team misread and mishandled the Arab Spring. As Joshua Landis explains in a remarkable, must-read interview, the U.S. response to these events — and especially Syria — was ill-conceived from the very start. In particular, Obama and his team mistakenly viewed the Arab Spring as a large-scale, grass-roots uprising clamoring for liberal democracy and embraced it too quickly. They also underestimated the ability of violent extremists to exploit power vacuums in failed states and the resilience of authoritarian regimes in places like Syria or Egypt. These misunderstandings led to Obama's disastrous intervention in Libya, his inept diplomatic interference in Yemen, and the premature demand that "Assad must go" in Syria. As regular readers know, I think Obama made the right call when he decided not to wade deeper into the Syrian quagmire, but his handling of this admittedly turbulent and difficult-to-read process can hardly be considered a success.

Regarding Israel-Palestine, Obama took office vowing to achieve a two-state solution by the end of his first term, and he and his second-term secretary of state, John Kerry, devoted endless hours to this quixotic quest. Unfortunately, they followed the standard "peace process" playbook and got the same results their predecessors did. A two-state solution is further away than ever and probably impossible, in part because Obama never seemed to grasp that relying on pro-Israel advisors with a long track record of *not* producing an agreement was a pretty good way to guarantee failure again. Nor did Obama and Kerry ever realize that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was not interested in a genuine two-state solution and that Israel was never going to cut a deal unless the United States made it clear that failing to do so would lead to dramatic reductions in U.S. military aid and diplomatic protection. Obama's offer of ever larger bribes of U.S. military aid proved inadequate to the task, as Netanyahu quite sensibly pocketed the offer and dug in his heels, even flying to Washington to dis the president in public. I understand why Obama felt he had to tolerate this sort of abuse from a dependent client state (after all, I wrote a book about it), but if he was unwilling to play hardball, he shouldn't have promised to deliver a solution and shouldn't have wasted any time or energy on it.

Obama's handling of Russia deserves no plaudits either. The early attempt at a "reset" made sense, but Obama and his advisors never understood that what they regarded as innocent and legitimate efforts to strengthen democracy in Eastern Europe or in Russia itself were not going to be viewed as benign by Moscow. Even worse, the White House appears to have been asleep at the switch in the months preceding the crisis in Ukraine and ended up blindsided by Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to annex Crimea. Moscow's actions are regrettable on many levels, but Obama and the people in charge of U.S. policy in Eastern Europe should not have been surprised. Great powers are always sensitive to events near their borders, and Moscow had made it clear, at least since 2008, that it would not let Ukraine or Georgia drift toward NATO without a fight. It was also abundantly clear that Putin saw U.S. and EU efforts to draw Ukraine to the West as a step toward bringing them into NATO, and he had both the motivation and the ability to stop it. And he did.

Obama's desire to "rebalance" U.S. attention toward Asia was sound, and his administration did make important progress toward that goal. But the failure to set clearer priorities or liquidate losing positions faster undermined the effort. Managing relations in Asia is complex, challenging, and time-consuming, and the United States will not be able to manage its Asian alliances and counter a rising China if it is constantly being distracted by events in places of far less strategic importance. The administration also blundered when it decided not to participate in China's new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and then found that even close allies like Britain and Israel were ignoring U.S. pressure and eager to join.

As I argued several years ago, the days when the United States could create security and maintain order in nearly every part of the world are behind it, and U.S. leaders must do a better job of deciding which places matter most and which can be left to run themselves. To a large extent, Obama never made that choice.

What explains these various failures? Two things, primarily. First, although Obama took office intending to re-engineer America's relationship with the world, he was quickly co-opted by the existing national security establishment and bought into its mantra that the United States as the "indispensable power" must take the lead in promoting a rules-based world order centered on free markets, democracy, and human rights. Here Obama did face a real dilemma: The Democratic Party's foreign-policy apparatus was dominated by dedicated liberal crusaders, which meant there was hardly anyone Obama could appoint who agreed wholeheartedly with his foreign-policy instincts. Once he selected people like Hillary Clinton, Jim Steinberg, Susan Rice, Tom Donilon, Samantha Power, and Anne-Marie Slaughter — along with veteran insiders like Robert Gates, John Brennan, and Dennis Ross — the die was cast. This group had plenty of disagreements, to be sure, but they were all ardent believers in U.S. "global leadership," and they rarely saw an international issue they didn't think the United States should play a major role in solving.

Like Bill Clinton, Obama tried to address a vast array of global problems as cheaply as possible (and without "boots on the ground"), but he never told the American people what their vital interests actually were. Equally important, this most eloquent of presidents never gave voters a simple template to help them distinguish between the places where the United States should stand ready to fight and regions it could safely leave to others. Instead, almost any part of the world could suddenly become a "vital interest" for which Washington was supposed to have a solution, and failure to act immediately in a crisis anywhere exposed him to charges that he was squandering U.S. credibility or leaving the country vulnerable to some shadowy danger. "He who defends everything defends nothing," warned Frederick the Great, and Obama's inability to develop a clear set of strategic priorities hurt him throughout his presidency.

Second, in both domestic and foreign policy, Obama failed to appreciate that his opponents were not as reasonable, rational, cool, or unselfish as he was. If a central theme runs through Obama's approach to politics, it is his conviction that people with differing views can come together, discuss, debate, share information, and gradually come to a mutual understanding that satisfies both sides and that will advance the public interest. This quality made him a great law review editor and a successful community organizer, but it hamstrung him as president in today's highly polarized political environment.

When dealing with Netanyahu, for example, Obama (and Kerry) thought it obvious that “two states for two peoples” was in Israel’s interest and that Netanyahu could be persuaded to see this once he was assured of continued U.S. support. They did not consider that Netanyahu might be personally wedded to the Likud party’s dream of a “Greater Israel” or worried that cutting a deal would cost him his job, and therefore no amount of cajoling or coddling would ever win him over. In Putin, Obama saw the leader of a declining power whose best course was to liberalize further and reform the lagging Russian economy. In this view, Putin just needed to be told that the United States was only trying to help his Eastern European neighbors prosper and not seeking to hurt Russia or topple him. Putin had different priorities, however, and in any case was not going to accept verbal assurances as he watched NATO creep ever eastward. Back at home, Obama seemed to think that he could win over Republicans by reaching out to them — as he did when he nominated a highly qualified and decidedly moderate candidate for the Supreme Court — never quite realizing that John Boehner, Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell, Ted Cruz, and the entire tea party cared more about Obama failing than they did about America succeeding.

Barack Obama is an intelligent, disciplined, eloquent, upright, patriotic, and wholly admirable man, and in many ways he was an inspirational president. It is no accident that his approval ratings are vastly higher than the man who will succeed him or that he may be the most popular politician in the world at large. He took office at a time when the United States faced genuine perils, and he safely steered the country away from the brink. Had he governed in a more tranquil era, and with a spirited but constructive party opposing him, he might have achieved even more.

But in foreign policy Obama’s record was mostly one of failure. Neither the state of the world nor America’s position in it is stronger today than they were when he took office. The outcome in Iraq and Afghanistan may not be his fault, as those wars were failures even before he took office, but some of his decisions compounded the mistakes he inherited.

But as I said in my column earlier this month, just because things look grim today does not mean they cannot get worse. And if they do, Obama’s presidency, despite the missteps and missed opportunities, will seem like an era of honor and decency that Americans willfully cast aside and may never fully regain.