
Evaluating Obama's Foreign Policy Record

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The more Trump talks, the better Barack Obama looks. As the president nears the end of his term, we might take a look at his record, keeping the Trump Doctrine of “America First” in the back of our minds. Not that Trump is going to succeed Obama; that job will go to Hillary Clinton. But an evaluation of Obama’s record is useful considering the choice between an incoherent and willful Donald Trump on one side and an experienced but fairly hawkish Clinton on the other.

How should we evaluate Obama’s record? Right-wing critics will of course excoriate Obama for all the usual things—weakness against adversaries like Russia and China, negotiating with instead of subverting Cuba and Iran, eviscerating the US military, undermining relations with Israel. On the left, Obama is already being cast as another liberal leader whose actions failed to deliver on his promises, from Guantanamo to the Middle East. Historians will have plenty of things to quarrel about, but we need not wait.

Let’s start with the positives: two major victories for engagement of adversaries, and some progress on environmental issues.

The Positives*Engagement*

In his extraordinary visit to Cuba in March, Obama signaled the end of the Cold War in the Americas and, while criticizing Cuba’s human rights record, [promised nonintervention](#).

Engaging Iran has been much more difficult. Some members of Congress, and right-wing groups such as United Against Nuclear Iran, continue to pressure the administration and US businesses to maintain remaining sanctions and stay away from Iran. Iran’s economy has yet to benefit significantly from the nuclear deal, and the ayatollah is still taking potshots at the US. Unless liberal Democrats gain the upper hand in Congress, and President Rouhani

wins next year's election in Iran, the trade embargo on Iran (and on Cuba too) will continue, [endangering Obama's engagement effort](#). Still, signs are that the nuclear deal is being fulfilled. Unfortunately, US diplomacy is not trying to build on that deal by ending the trade embargo and bringing Iran into a bold Middle East peace process that would include Iraq's and Syria's civil wars.

The Environment

On Earth Day 2016 the President, along with China's president Xi Jinping, signed the Paris Agreement on climate change, committing the US to reduce greenhouse gas emissions between 25 and 28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025. Whether or not that target can be achieved depends on a Supreme Court decision that will not be handed down until well after Obama leaves office: his administrative act to curb emissions from power plants, which the Court blocked in February. Responding to environmental pressure groups, Obama has rejected the Keystone XL fracking project, imposed a three-year moratorium on coal mining on public lands, and, in a policy reversal, banned drilling along the Atlantic coast for five years.

The Negatives

Quagmire

The cause of peace in the Middle East has not advanced under Obama. His decision to [follow Hillary Clinton's advice](#) rather than his own inclinations and intervene in Libya after the overthrow of Muammar el-Qaddafi was disastrous. Libya is fast becoming a failed state. The civil war in Syria has emptied the country. As many as 400,000 people have died, perhaps 10 times as many have become refugees, and millions more are internally displaced. No further military investment can make life better for the remaining population and anti-Assad fighters. There, as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan, the peace process has collapsed and good governance is a distant dream. Yet the administration, far from developing a strategy to extricate the US from Iraq and Afghanistan, has already stated that it will keep more than 5,000 troops in Afghanistan into 2017 and gives every indication that the US will resume a combat role in Iraq despite the endless political squabbling, corruption, and sectarian violence there. Obama's reliance on elite forces and drones may reduce US casualties, but it still amounts to intervention and avoidance of creative peacemaking.

The failed promise of the Arab Spring virtually everywhere [has been equaled](#) by the US failure to find faithful partners amidst extremists. The US has no reliable allies in the Arab Middle East. Making matters worse, the Obama administration has followed the traditional American path of supporting anti-democratic regimes that thwart US policy goals but win US favor by proclaiming their anti-terrorism. (If this sounds familiar, it is: merely a twist on the Cold War scenario in which the US extended support to dictatorships that trumpeted their anti-communism.) The US continues to feed the Pakistan military with billions of dollars in aid, carries out drone strikes that kill civilians (and expands drone bases in Africa), and turns the other way while Pakistan's intelligence service cultivates ties with the Taliban operating in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia's criticism of US engagement with Iran and Syria policy has [not stopped the US](#) from providing the Saudis with intelligence and material support of a horrendous bombing campaign in Yemen. The civilian toll in death and destruction is running very high, and al-Qaeda has gained as a result. Obama's celebrated "rebuke" of the Saudis and his urging that they accept a "cold peace" with Iran has not fundamentally altered the US-Saudi relationship, testimony to a failure of will.

US support of authoritarian, military-backed regimes extends to other countries, such as Thailand, where the military is rewriting the constitution with what the UN human rights commissioner calls "dangerously sweeping laws and order" while the economy sinks; Egypt, where the military under President Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi has practically dismantled the constitution and conducted widespread repression; and Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is eviscerating the secular democracy step by step.

Finally, Obama has proven unwilling, not just unable, to craft a new approach to Israel based on social justice and respect for human rights. Though the Netanyahu administration is very unhappy with Obama over policy in Iran and Syria, it has nothing to complain about regarding US policy toward Israel. Obama, like every president before him, will not take the crucial step of sanctioning Israel over its expansion of settlements and denial of basic rights to the Palestinians.

Weapons Always Welcome

Nothing has changed when it comes to the Pentagon slush fund. Instead of a breakthrough on creating Obama's

nuclear-free world, we see the [continued development](#) of new weapons of mass destruction, including nearly \$20 billion on nuclear weapons this year alone as part of a \$1 trillion Pentagon plan for weapons upgrading generally. That direction hardly improves prospects for reducing the nuclear danger, for example with regard to North Korea. Why the administration has made no any serious effort to engage North Korea, a move that would also help improve relations with China, and instead keeps insisting that the DPRK must first terminate its nuclear-weapons program, defies logic.

Worsening Relations with Russia and China

Relations with Russia relations have turned opposite of the “reset” that Obama envisaged early in his first term. Of course, Russian behavior is half the explanation—the absorption of Crimea and the intervention in Ukraine (which continues)—but the other half is the needlessly provocative US behavior along Russia's western frontier. What has resulted is a [dangerous cat-and-mouse](#) game, characterized by three recent close encounters in the Baltic Sea, plans for a large-scale US-NATO military exercise, and a huge US military buildup in Europe that includes significant aid to countries bordering Russia. The fallout of this tension may be seen in Syria, where hopes have been dashed for a reliable US-Russia agreement that might turn a cease-fire into a lasting political solution.

With China, the relationship continues to be one of “strategic mistrust.” As with Russia, danger lurks in US and Chinese maneuvering and posturing in and around the South China Sea. China claims sovereignty over the tiny islands and the US claims freedom of navigation, setting the stage for a confrontation as each country escalates shows of force to make its point. (The election of a Filipino president who rivals Donald Trump for bluster and lack of foreign affairs experience adds to the potential for a miscalculation, since the US has revitalized military ties with Manila.) Contentious US-China relations extends to many other issues, such as China's crackdown on civil society, its military modernization, differences over trade and currency values, and most recently a new Chinese law that restricts the activities of foreign NGOs.

Miscalculations leading to violence are entirely possible. Mutual understanding has suffered in both cases, replaced by US recourse to sanctions against Russia and warnings to China via gunship diplomacy. Predictably, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have responded in kind.

Law, Secrets, and Ethics

The use of drones has dramatically expanded, and with it the unanswered question as to their effectiveness and lawfulness. [Many commentators](#) have questioned the former on the grounds that more terrorists are created than killed by drone attacks. The same conclusion applies to Obama's reliance on [Special Forces](#) and intelligence agents.

Also shameful is the administration's timid response to Europe's refugee crisis. Obama isn't building walls, but he is only taking in a tiny number of Syrian and other refugees fleeing war. The President promised to admit around 10,000 Syrians in the current fiscal year, far more than the pitifully small number in years past. Granted, the US permanently resettles more refugees per year than any other country. But the US can afford to be far more generous, and not only with Syrians, especially since US interventions abroad have contributed to the refugee crisis. I suspect that election-year politics has everything to do with sharply limiting admissions from the Middle East.

Obama's legacy on lawlessness extends to the undeclared wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq over the last eight years, and the support of Saudi Arabia's bombing in Yemen. At the least, he has failed to uphold his promise to support the War Powers Resolution and its 60-day requirement to seek Congressional approval of the use of force. He's repeating the disastrous Vietnam model of incremental intervention, using Special Forces “advisers,” “trainers,” drones, and other devices in lieu of major combat forces. But the scale of involvement aside, US forces are still in combat, and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle are remiss in their duties by failing to challenge the President's succumbing to mission creep.

Obama's tough line on whistleblowers, most notably Edward Snowden, is just the tip of the iceberg. Occasionally, his administration has surprised us by declassifying once-sensitive material, such as US support of Argentina's “dirty war” against leftists during the Nixon-Kissinger era. But that was then. Coinciding with his declassification decision was a visit to Argentina that, [according to human-rights activists](#), lent support to an authoritarian regime that has overturned various democratic reforms.

In Sum

Obama's foreign policy has been long on progressive rhetoric and (engagement with Iran and Cuba excepted) short on substantive accomplishment. To be sure, we need to make allowance for the backward-looking Congress with which he has had to contend; and we should give more than a little credit to Obama for going over its head on Iran, Cuba, and climate change. But we had come to expect more, much more, from him, especially on issues of war and peace. After all, he was supposed to have learned from the George W. Bush years that you "[don't do stupid shit](#)" and get yourself bogged down in hopeless foreign adventures. But he hasn't learned. A foreign-policy legacy that includes a costly and irremediable quagmire in the Middle East as well as hostile relations with Russia, considerable contention with China, and very modest advances on climate change is not much to crow about. The most positive prediction I can make is that by 2020, another Clinton presidency will make us feel much better about Barack Obama's foreign policy record.
