

## **From hope to audacity: Appraising Obama's foreign policy**

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The foreign policy of U.S. President Barack Obama can be assessed most usefully in two parts: first, his goals and decision-making system and, second, his policies and their implementation. Although one can speak with some confidence about the former, the latter is still an unfolding process.

To his credit, Obama has undertaken a truly ambitious effort to redefine the United States' view of the world and to reconnect the United States with the emerging historical context of the twenty-first century. He has done this remarkably well. In less than a year, he has comprehensively reconceptualized U.S. foreign policy with respect to several centrally important geopolitical issues:

- Islam is not an enemy, and the "global war on terror" does not define the United States' current role in the world;
- the United States will be a fair-minded and assertive mediator when it comes to attaining lasting peace between Israel and Palestine;
- the United States ought to pursue serious negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, as well as other issues;
- the counterinsurgency campaign in the Taliban-controlled parts of Afghanistan should be part of a larger political undertaking, rather than a predominantly military one;
- the United States should respect Latin America's cultural and historical sensitivities and expand its contacts with Cuba;
- the United States ought to energize its commitment to significantly reducing its nuclear arsenal and embrace the eventual goal of a world free of nuclear weapons;
- in coping with global problems, China should be treated not only as an economic partner but also as a geopolitical one;
- improving U.S.-Russian relations is in the obvious interest of both sides, although this must be done in a manner that accepts, rather than seeks to undo, post-Cold War geopolitical realities; and
- a truly collegial transatlantic partnership should be given deeper meaning, particularly in order to heal the rifts caused by the destructive controversies of the past few years.

For all that, he did deserve the Nobel Peace Prize. Overall, Obama has demonstrated a genuine sense of strategic direction, a solid grasp of what today's world is all about, and an understanding of what the United States ought to be doing in it. Whether these convictions are a byproduct of his personal history, his studies, or his intuitive sense of history, they represent a strategically and historically coherent worldview. The new president, it should be added, has also been addressing the glaring social and environmental dilemmas that confront humanity and about which the United States has been indifferent for too long. But this appraisal focuses on his responses to the most urgent geopolitical challenges.

### Challenges to White House leadership

Obama's overall perspective sets the tone for his foreign-policy-making team, which is firmly centered in the White House. The president relies on Vice President Joe Biden's broad experience in foreign affairs to explore ideas and engage in informal strategizing. National

Security Adviser James Jones coordinates the translation of the president's strategic outlook into policy, while also having to manage the largest National Security Council in history -- its over-200-person staff is almost four times as large as the NSC staffs of Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and George H. W. Bush and almost ten times as large as John F. Kennedy's. The influence of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates on national security strategy has been growing steadily. Gates' immediate task is to successfully conclude two wars, but his influence is also felt on matters pertaining to Iran and Russia. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who has the president's ear as well as his confidence, is likewise a key participant in foreign policy decisions and is the country's top diplomat. Her own engagement is focused more on the increasingly urgent global issues of the new century, rather than on the geopolitical ones of the recent past.

Finally, Obama's two trusted political advisers, David Axelrod and Rahm Emanuel, who closely monitor the sensitive relationship between foreign and domestic politics, also participate in decision-making. (For example, both sat in on the president's critical September meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.) When appropriate, policy discussions also include two experienced negotiators, George Mitchell, who conducts the Middle East peace negotiations, and Richard Holbrooke, who coordinates the regional response to the challenges in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In effect, they are an extension of the president's NSC-centered process.

On this team, Obama himself is the main source of the strategic direction, but, unavoidably, he is able to play this role on only a part-time basis. This is a weakness, because the conceptual initiator of a great power's foreign policy needs to be actively involved in supervising the design of the consequent strategic decisions, in overlooking their implementation, and in making timely adjustments. Yet Obama has had no choice but to spend much of his first year in office on domestic political affairs.

As a result, his grand redefinition of U.S. foreign policy is vulnerable to dilution or delay by upper-level officials who have the bureaucratic predisposition to favor caution over action and the familiar over the innovative. Some of them may even be unsympathetic to the president's priorities regarding the Middle East and Iran. It hardly needs to be added that officials who are not in sympathy with advocated policies rarely make good executors. Additionally, the president's domestic political advisers inevitably tend to be more sensitive to pressures from domestic interest groups. This usually fosters a reluctance to plan for a firm follow-through on bold presidential initiatives should they suddenly encounter a foreign rebuff reinforced by powerful domestic lobbies. Netanyahu's rejection of Obama's public demand that Israel halt the construction of settlements on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem is a case in point.

It is still too early to make a firm assessment of the president's determination to pursue his priorities, as most of the large issues that Obama has personally addressed involve long-range problems that call for long-term management. But three urgent issues do pose, even in the short run, an immediate and difficult test of his ability and his resolve to significantly change U.S. policy: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and the Afghan-Pakistani challenge. Each of these also happens to be a sensitive issue at home.

#### The Israeli-Palestinian conundrum

The first urgent challenge is, of course, the Middle East peace process. Obama stated early on that he would take the initiative on this issue and aim for a settlement in the relative near term. That position is justified historically and is in keeping with the United States' national interest. Paralysis over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has lasted far too long, and leaving it unresolved has pernicious consequences for the Palestinians, for the region, and for the United

States, and it will eventually harm Israel. It is not fashionable to say this, but it is demonstrably true that -- deservedly or not -- much of the current hostility toward the United States in the Middle East and the Islamic world as a whole has been generated by the bloodshed and suffering produced by this prolonged conflict. Osama bin Laden's self-serving justifications for 9/11 are a reminder that the United States itself is also a victim of the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum.

By now, after more than 40 years of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and 30 years of peace negotiations, it is quite evident that left to themselves, neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians will resolve the conflict on their own. There are many reasons for this, but the bottom line is that the Palestinians are too divided and too weak to make the critical decisions necessary to push the peace process forward, and the Israelis are too divided and too strong to do the same. As a result, a firm external initiative defining the basic parameters of a final settlement is needed to jump-start serious negotiations between the two parties. And that can only come from the United States.

But the necessary outside stimulus has not yet been forthcoming in a fashion consistent with U.S. interests and potential. In raising the issue of the settlements in the spring of 2009 but then later backing off when rebuffed by the Israeli government, the administration strengthened the hard-line elements in Israel and undercut the more moderate elements on the Palestinian side. Then, an opportunity provided by the annual UN General Assembly meeting in September to identify the United States with the overwhelming global consensus about the basic parameters of a peace settlement was squandered. Instead of seizing it, Obama merely urged the Israelis and the Palestinians to negotiate in good faith.

Yet the existing global consensus could serve as a launching pad for serious negotiations on four basic points. First, Palestinian refugees should not be granted the right of return to what is now Israel, because Israel cannot be expected to commit suicide for the sake of peace. The refugees will have to be resettled within the Palestinian state, with compensation and maybe some expression of regret for their suffering. This will be very difficult for the Palestinian national movement to swallow, but there is no alternative.

Second, Jerusalem has to be shared, and shared genuinely. The Israeli capital, of course, would be in West Jerusalem, but East Jerusalem should be the capital of a Palestinian state, with the Old City shared under some international arrangement. If a genuine compromise on Jerusalem is not part of a settlement, resentment will persist throughout the West Bank and the Palestinians will reject the peace process. Although such a compromise will understandably be difficult for the Israelis to accept, without it there cannot be a peace of reconciliation.

Third, a settlement must be based on the 1967 lines, but with territorial swaps that would allow the large settlements to be incorporated into Israel without any further reduction of the territory of the Palestinian state. That means some territorial compensation for Palestine from parts of northern and southern Israel that border the West Bank. It is important to remember that although the Israeli and Palestinian populations are almost equal in number, under the 1967 lines the Palestinian territories account for only 22 percent of the old British mandate, whereas the Israeli territories account for 78 percent.

Fourth, the United States or NATO must make a commitment to station troops along the Jordan River. Such a move would reinforce Israel's security with strategic depth. It would reduce Israel's fears that an independent Palestine could some day serve as a springboard for a major Arab attack on Israel.

Had Obama embraced this internationally favored blueprint for peace when he addressed the UN in September, he would have exerted enormous influence on both the Israelis and the

Palestinians and instantaneously gained global support. Failing to endorse this plan was a missed opportunity, especially since the two-state solution is beginning to lose some of its credibility as a viable formula for reconciliation between the Israelis and the Palestinians and within the region. Moreover, there are indications that the United States is already losing the goodwill and renewed confidence of the Arab world that Obama won with his speech in Cairo in June.

The next few months will be critical, and the time for decisive action is running out. Perhaps as a consolation to the Palestinians (and in spite of some opposition within the White House) or perhaps as a reaffirmation of his determination to continue pressing the parties to focus on the key issues, in his UN speech Obama called for final-status negotiations to begin soon and included on the agenda four items similar to these. He also made it explicitly clear that the talks' ultimate goal ought to be "a viable, independent Palestinian state with contiguous territory that ends the occupation that began in 1967." It can be hoped that the president seized the moment offered by the Oslo ceremony at which the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded (which at the time of this writing had not yet occurred) to give more substance to his Middle East peace initiative. But so far, the Obama team has shown neither the tactical skill nor the strategic firmness needed to move the peace process forward.

#### The Iranian challenge

Another urgent and potentially very dangerous challenge, with similarly huge stakes, is confronting Obama in Iran. It involves the true character of the Iranian nuclear program and Iran's role in the region. Obama has been determined to explore the path of serious negotiations with Iran despite domestic (and some foreign) agitation and even some opposition within the second echelon of his team. Without quite saying so, he has basically downgraded the U.S. military option, although it is still fashionable to say that "all options remain on the table." But the prospects for a successful negotiation are still quite uncertain.

Two fundamental questions complicate the situation. First, are the Iranians willing to negotiate -- or even capable of doing so -- seriously? The United States has to be realistic when discussing this aspect, since the clock cannot be turned back: the Iranians have the capability to enrich uranium, and they are not going to give it up. But it is still possible, perhaps through a more intrusive inspection regime, to fashion a reasonably credible arrangement that prevents weaponization. Nonetheless, even if the United States and its partners approach the negotiations with a constructive mindset, the Iranians themselves may scuttle any serious prospects for a positive outcome. Already, at the outset of the negotiating process, Iran's credibility was undermined by the convoluted manner in which Tehran complicated a promising compromise for a cooperative Iranian-Russian-French arrangement for processing its enriched uranium.

Second, is Washington willing to engage in negotiations with some degree of patience and with sensitivity to the mentality of the other side? It would not be conducive to serious negotiations if the United States were to persist in publicly labeling Iran as a terrorist state, as a state that is not to be trusted, as a state against which sanctions or even a military option should be prepared. Doing that would simply play into the hands of the most hard-line elements in Iran. It would facilitate their appeal to Iranian nationalism, and it would narrow the cleavage that has recently emerged in Iran between those who desire a more liberal regime and those who seek to perpetuate a fanatical dictatorship.

These points must be borne in mind if and when additional sanctions become necessary. Care should be taken to make certain that the sanctions are politically intelligent and that they isolate the regime rather than unify all Iranians. Sanctions must punish those in power -- not

the Iranian middle class, as an embargo on gasoline would do. The unintended result of imposing indiscriminately crippling sanctions would likely be to give the Iranians the impression that the United States' real objective is to prevent their country from acquiring even a peaceful nuclear program -- and that, in turn, would fuel nationalism and outrage.

Moreover, even the adoption of politically discriminating sanctions is likely to be complicated by international constraints. China, given its dependence on Middle Eastern (and particularly Iranian) oil, fears the consequences of a sharpened crisis. The position of Russia is ambiguous since as a major energy supplier to Europe, it stands to benefit financially from a prolonged crisis in the Persian Gulf that would prevent the entrance of Iranian oil into the European market. Indeed, from the Russian geopolitical perspective, a steep rise in the price of oil as a result of a conflict in the Persian Gulf would be most economically damaging to the United States and China -- countries whose global preeminence Russia tends to resent and even fear -- and would make Europe even more dependent on Russian energy.

Throughout this complicated process, firm presidential leadership will be required. That is particularly so because of the presence of influential voices in the United States, both inside and outside the administration, in favor of a negotiating process that minimizes the possibility of a reasonable compromise. Prior to joining the administration, some senior second-level officials seemed to favor policies designed to force an early confrontation with Iran and even advocated joint military consultations with Israel regarding the use of force. The somewhat sensationalized manner in which the administration revealed in late September that it had been aware for months of the secret Iranian nuclear facility near Qom suggests internal disagreements over tactics.

Ultimately, a larger strategic question is at stake: Should the United States' long-term goal be the evolution of Iran into a stabilizing power in the Middle East? To state the issue even more sharply and simply: Should its policy be designed to encourage Iran to eventually become a partner of the United States again -- and even, as it was for three decades, of Israel? The wider the agenda -- one that addressed regional security issues, potential economic cooperation, and so on -- the greater the possibility of finding acceptable quid pro quos. Or should Iran be treated as if it is fated to remain a hostile and destabilizing power in an already vulnerable region?

As of this writing, an acceptable outcome to the negotiations is obviously still very much in doubt. Assuming they are not aborted, by early 2010 it may be possible to make a calmly calculated judgment as to whether the talks are worth continuing or whether there in fact is no room for reciprocal compromises. At that point, politically intelligent sanctions may become timely. So far, Obama has shown that he is aware of the need to combine strategic firmness with tactical flexibility; he is patiently exploring whether diplomacy can lead to an accommodation. He has avoided any explicit commitment to a precise deadline (unlike France's grandstanding in favor of a December date), and he has not engaged in explicit threats of military action.

Those advocating a tougher stance should remember that the United States would bear the brunt of the painful consequences in the event of an attack on Iran, whether the United States or Israel launched it. Iran would likely target U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, possibly destabilizing both countries; the Strait of Hormuz could become a blazing war zone; and Americans would again pay steep prices at the gas pump. Iran is an issue regarding which, above all, Obama must trust himself to lead and not to be led. So far, he has done so.

The Afpak Quagmire

The third urgent and politically sensitive foreign policy issue is posed by the Afghan-Pakistani predicament. Obama has moved toward abandoning some of the more ambitious, even ideological, objectives that defined the United States' initial engagement in Afghanistan -- the creation of a modern democracy, for example. But the United States must be very careful lest its engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which still has primarily and most visibly a military dimension, comes to be viewed by the Afghans and the Pakistanis as yet another case of Western colonialism and elicits from them an increasingly militant response.

Some top U.S. generals have recently stated that the United States is not winning militarily, an appraisal that ominously suggests the conflict with the Taliban could become similar to the Soviet Union's earlier confrontation with Afghan resistance. A comprehensive strategic reassessment has thus become urgently needed. The proposal made in September by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom for an international conference on the subject was helpful and timely; the United States was wise to welcome it. But to be effective, any new strategy has to emphasize two key elements. First, the Afghan government and NATO should seek to engage locally in a limited process of accommodation with receptive elements of the Taliban. The Taliban are not a global revolutionary or terrorist movement, and although they are a broad alliance with a rather medieval vision of what Afghanistan ought to be, they do not directly threaten the West. Moreover, they are still very much a minority phenomenon that ultimately can be defeated only by other Afghans (helped economically and militarily by the United States and its NATO allies), a fact that demands a strategy that is more political than military.

Additionally, the United States needs to develop a policy for gaining the support of Pakistan, not just in denying the Taliban a sanctuary in Pakistan but also in pressuring the Taliban in Afghanistan to accommodate. Given that many Pakistanis may prefer a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to a secular Afghanistan that leans toward Pakistan's archrival, India, the United States needs to assuage Pakistan's security concerns in order to gain its full cooperation in the campaign against the irreconcilable elements of the Taliban. In this regard, the support of China could be helpful, particularly considering its geopolitical stake in regional stability and its traditionally close ties with Islamabad.

It is likely that before this appraisal hits the newsstands, Obama will have announced a more comprehensive strategy for attaining a politically acceptable outcome to the ongoing conflict -- and one that U.S. allies are also prepared to support. His approach so far has been deliberate. He has been careful to assess both the military and the political dimensions of the challenge and also to take into account the views of U.S. allies. Nothing would be worse for NATO than if one part of the alliance (western Europe) left the other part of the alliance (the United States) alone in Afghanistan. Such a fissure over NATO's first campaign initially based on Article 5, the collective defense provision, would probably spell the end of the alliance.

How Obama handles these three urgent and interrelated issues -- the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Iranian dilemma, and the Afghan-Pakistani conflict -- will determine the United States' global role for the foreseeable future. The consequences of a failed peace process in the Middle East, a military collision with Iran, and an intensifying military engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan all happening simultaneously could commit the United States for many years to a lonely and self-destructive conflict in a huge and volatile area. Eventually, that could spell the end of the United States' current global preeminence.

#### Key strategic relationships

The president, in addition to coping with these immediate challenges, has indicated his intent to improve three key geopolitical relationships of the United States: with Russia, with China,

and with Europe. Each involves longer-term dilemmas but does not require crisis management now. Each has its own peculiarities: Russia is a former imperial power with revisionist ambitions but declining social capital; China is a rising world power that is modernizing itself at an astonishing pace but deliberately downplaying its ambitions; Europe is a global economic power devoid of either military clout or political will. Obama has rightly indicated that the United States needs to collaborate more closely with each of them.

Hence, the administration decided to "reset" the United States' relationship with Russia. But that slogan is confusing, and it is not yet clear that Washington's wishful thinking about Moscow's shared interests on such matters as Iran is fully justified. Nonetheless, the United States must think strategically about its long-term relationship with Russia and pursue a two-track policy: it has to cooperate with Russia whenever doing so is mutually beneficial, but in a way that is also responsive to historical reality. The age of closed empires is over, and Russia, for the sake of its own future, will eventually have to accept this.

Seeking to expand cooperation with Russia does not mean condoning Russia's subordination of Georgia (through which the vital Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline passes, providing Europe with access to Central Asian energy) or its intimidation of Ukraine (an industrial and agricultural heartland of the former Soviet Union). Either move would be a giant step backward. Each would intensify Russia's imperial nostalgia and central Europe's security fears, not to mention increase the possibility of armed conflicts. Yet so far, the Obama administration has been quite reluctant to provide even purely defensive arms to Georgia (in contrast to Russia's provision of offensive weaponry to Venezuela), nor has it been sufficiently active in encouraging the EU to be more responsive to Ukraine's European aspirations. Fortunately, Vice President Biden's fall 2009 visit to Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic did reaffirm the United States' long-term interest in political pluralism within the former Soviet space and in a cooperative relationship with a truly postimperial Russia. And it should always be borne in mind that the survival of the former makes the latter more likely.

A longer-term effort to engage China in a more forthcoming approach to global problems is also needed. China is, as it has proclaimed, "rising peacefully," and unlike Russia, it is patiently self-confident. But one can also argue that China is rising somewhat selfishly and needs to be drawn more broadly into constructive cooperation on global economic, financial, and environmental decisions. It also has growing political influence over geopolitical issues that affect core U.S. interests: North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Thus, Obama's decision to develop a top-level bilateral U.S.-Chinese relationship has been timely. Cultivating at the presidential-summit level a de facto geopolitical G-2 (not to be confused with proposals for an economic G-2), highlighted by Obama's November visit to China, is helping develop an increasingly significant strategic dialogue. The leaders of the United States and China recognize that both countries have a major stake in an effectively functioning world system. And they appear to appreciate the historic potential and the respective national interests inherent in such a bilateral relationship.

Paradoxically, despite Obama's expressed desire, there seem to be fewer prospects in the near future for a strategically significant enhancement of the United States' relationship with its closest political, economic, and military partner: Europe. Obama's predecessor left a bitter legacy there, which Obama has greatly redressed in terms of public opinion. But genuine strategic cooperation on a global scale is not possible with a partner that not only has no defined and authoritative political leadership but also lacks an internal consensus regarding its world role.

Hence, Obama's intent to reignite the Atlantic partnership is necessarily limited to dialogues with the three key European states with genuine international clout: the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. But the utility of such dialogues is reduced by the personal and political differences among these countries' leaders -- not to mention the British prime minister's grim political prospects, the French president's preoccupation with personal celebrity, and the German chancellor's eastward gaze. The emergence of a unified and therefore influential European worldview, with which Obama could effectively engage, seems unlikely anytime soon.

### Domestic Impediments

What then, on balance, can be said of Obama's foreign policy? So far, it has generated more expectations than strategic breakthroughs. Nonetheless, Obama has significantly altered U.S. policies regarding the three most urgent challenges facing the country. But as a democracy, the United States has to base its foreign policy decisions on domestic political consent. And unfortunately for Obama, gaining that support is becoming more difficult because of three systemic weaknesses that impede the pursuit of an intelligent and decisive foreign policy in an increasingly complex global setting.

The first is that foreign policy lobbies have become more influential in U.S. politics. Thanks to their access to Congress, a variety of lobbies -- some financially well endowed, some backed by foreign interests -- have been promoting, to an unprecedented degree, legislative intervention in foreign-policy making. Now more than ever, Congress not only actively opposes foreign policy decisions but even imposes some on the president. (The pending legislation on sanctions against Iran is but one example.) Such congressional intervention, promoted by lobbies, is a serious handicap in shaping a foreign policy meant to be responsive to the ever-changing realities of global politics and makes it more difficult to ensure that U.S. -- not foreign -- interests are the point of departure.

The second, documented by a 2009 RAND study, pertains to the deepening ideological cleavage that is reducing the prospects for effective bipartisanship in foreign policy. The resulting polarization not only makes a bipartisan foreign policy less likely, but it also encourages the infusion of demagoguery into policy conflicts. And it poisons the public discourse. Still worse, personal vilification and hateful, as well as potentially violent, rhetoric are becoming widespread in that realm of political debate that is subject to neither fact checking nor libel laws: the blogosphere.

Last but not least, of the large democratic countries, the United States has one of the least informed publics when it comes to global affairs. Many Americans, as various National Geographic surveys have shown, are not even familiar with basic global geography. Their knowledge of other countries' histories and cultures is not much better. How can a public unfamiliar with geography or foreign history have even an elementary grasp of, say, the geopolitical dilemmas that the United States faces in Afghanistan and Pakistan? With the accelerating decline in the circulation of newspapers and the trivialization of once genuinely informative television reporting, reliable and timely news about critical global issues is becoming less available to the general public. In that context, demagogically formulated solutions tend to become more appealing, especially in critical moments.

Together, these three systemic weaknesses are complicating efforts to gain public support for a rational foreign policy attuned to the complexity of the global dilemmas facing the United States. Obama's instinct is to lead by conciliation. That has been his political experience, and it has obviously been the key to his electoral success. Conciliation, backed by personal inspiration and the mass mobilization of populist hopes, is indeed the most important impetus

for moving a policy agenda forward in a large democracy. In campaigning for the presidency, Obama proved that he was a master both of social conciliation and of political mobilization. But he has not yet made the transition from inspiring orator to compelling statesman. Advocating that something happen is not the same as making it happen.

In the tough realities of world affairs, leadership also requires an unrelenting firmness in overcoming foreign opposition, in winning the support of friends, in negotiating seriously when necessary with hostile states, and in gaining grudging respect even from those governments that the United States sometimes has an interest in intimidating. To these ends, the optimal moment for blending national aspirations with decisive leadership is when the personal authority of the president is at its highest -- usually during the first year in office. For President Obama, alas, that first year has been dominated by the economic crisis and the struggle over health-care reform. The next three years may thus be more difficult. For the United States' national interest, but also for humanity's sake, that makes it truly vital for Obama to pursue with tenacious audacity the soaring hopes he unleashed.

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