

## OBAMA'S RECORD: TACTICS TRUMP STRATEGY IN AN AGE OF CONSTRAINTS

JUDAH GRUNSTEIN

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# Obama's Record: Tactics Trump Strategy in an Age of Constraints

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As President Barack Obama's first term in office draws to a close, attention has naturally turned to assessing his foreign policy record over the past four years. And while partisan debates in the run-up to November's election are certain to feature more caricature than reasoned argument, even nonpartisan observers diverge when it comes to Obama's foreign policy legacy to date, as recent articles by [George Packer](#), [Conor Friedersdorf](#) and [Daniel Larison](#) demonstrate.

The challenge is less identifying Obama's successes and failures than determining the costs of the trade-offs he has made. Broadly speaking, the Obama team's clearest policy successes have been the disengagement from Iraq and its sophisticated approach to China's rise and Asia more broadly, where it has consolidated the institutionalization of U.S.-China consultations begun under the Bush administration, while shoring up regional relationships on a bilateral and multilateral level. In Africa, too, the administration has contributed significantly to regional security, if often indirectly and to the detriment of the democracy and governance agenda it initially highlighted.

Obama's biggest failure has been his high-profile attempt to jumpstart Israel-Palestine final status negotiations. The administration's [response to the Honduras coup](#) showed a similar penchant for finding a policy line that alienates all sides.

Also problematic is that Obama has approached large swathes of the planet with benign neglect. The administration's efforts to engage with Latin America have been sporadic and rote, at a time when opportunities (energy security) are rife and challenges (counternarcotics and governance) remain acute. Europe was almost absent from the administration's early agenda, outside of securing troop contributions for Afghanistan, until the European Union debt crisis made it an urgent but stubbornly unsolvable mess.

Elsewhere, Obama's record has been a mixed bag of realist horse-trading. The administration's dealings with Russia are a case in point, where the prioritization of certain U.S. objectives -- New START, logistical supply routes to Afghanistan and strengthening multilateral sanctions on Iran -- has led to compromise or policy paralysis on other key issues, notably missile defense and Syria. India is another example where inflated expectations for the bilateral relationship's potential have led to equally inflated criticisms of the results. And in Afghanistan, Obama has skillfully managed the domestic politics of withdrawal, while failing to put in place a realistic national and regional exit strategy.

One common criticism of Obama -- [that he just hasn't accomplished anything of significance](#) -- is in large part due to the geopolitical context in which the administration is operating, characterized most prominently by constraints on action. Some of these constraints have to do with the Bush administration's legacy, not least the [need to nurture multilateral legitimacy](#) for U.S. action. Domestic intervention fatigue and the need to reset an overstretched U.S. military also mean that the use of military force must be reserved for cases of either vital national interest or little risk (Libya), leaving out the broad middle range of typical crises, such as Syria.

The global financial crisis has further limited the range of options by introducing budgetary constraints that require strategic choices and trade-offs. At the same time, rapidly accelerating global economic integration has added another layer of constraints, **with the economic framework of mutually assured dependence** deterring unilateral action, even as the global shift of power to the emerging East and South has expanded opportunities to block collective action.

In part because of this paralyzing environment, Obama has proceeded with an emphasis on tactics over strategy, what Packer admiringly calls “exercising good judgment on a case-by-case basis.” At times he has managed to muddle through, the most notable example being the Arab Spring. As the upheaval cascaded across the region, Obama struck an often awkward balance between interests and ideals, keeping an eye on national particularities and the broader regional picture. If that picture has turned out to be messy, radical transformations usually are.

The downside of this approach was on clear display in the improvised response to the Libya crisis, but it is best illustrated by the administration’s Iran policy. Tactically, Obama shrewdly used Tehran’s rejection of his initial outreach initiative to legitimate subsequent efforts to strengthen multilateral sanctions on Iran. Strategically, the predictable diplomatic impasse that resulted has boxed in not only Tehran, but also Obama himself, and could very well now lead to a war with global repercussions.

As with Israel-Palestine, the terms of a final agreement on Iran’s uranium enrichment program are already known: The necessary step from the U.S., as true four years ago as this past week in Moscow, is to acknowledge an endgame whereby Iran can enrich uranium to 3 percent under strict IAEA oversight. The problem is sequencing the confidence-building measures necessary to get there in a climate of mutual distrust.

In the case of Iran, bad timing and domestic politics on both sides **made substantive progress a long shot**. But in not putting Iran’s right to enrichment on the table, Obama demonstrated a lack of courage, one that might be chalked off to first-termitis if it didn’t characterize his foreign policy instincts more generally. The divergence between Obama’s idealist rhetoric and pragmatic instincts became obvious very early on. But Obama’s inner realist has proved to be much more risk-averse than many expected, especially **given the room to maneuver** that his electoral mandate afforded him.

In the meantime, in the absence of diplomatic progress toward halting Iran’s nuclear ambitions, Obama has resorted to covert action (Flame, Stuxnet), with unpredictable consequences for both outcomes in Iran and broader policy precedents in the cyber domain. Along with his use of drone warfare, this highlights another major facet of Obama’s idealist-realist split, whereby his highly visible multilateralism in support of collective action is undergirded by a hidden unilateralism in pursuit of U.S. national interests. On one hand, the U.S. is posited as the guarantor of global stability in the transition to an uncertain and unstable emergent order. On the other, it is placed above that order as the unilateral rule-set enforcer. In a 21st century update of Theodore Roosevelt’s famous “walk softly but carry a big stick,” Obama leads from behind but strikes from above. □

*Judah Grunstein is World Politics Review’s editor-in-chief.*

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