

## OBAMA MUST SEIZE OPPORTUNITY FOR BOLDER FOREIGN POLICY

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# Obama Must Seize Opportunity for Bolder Foreign Policy

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Having won re-election, President Barack Obama now faces the daunting task of reinvigorating American foreign policy. There are reasons to be optimistic. As he turns his sights to his second term, the president has the benefit of four years of executive experience and is buoyed by the political capital that comes of even the most modest electoral victories. Both could translate into a more determined hand at the helm of the ship of state, even if domestic challenges will necessarily receive the lion's share of the president's attention. But for the Obama administration to solidify what has to date been an uneven record, a number of shifts are necessary.

To begin with, as the foreign policy and national security posts for the second-term administration are filled, the guiding imperative must be on streamlining and harmonizing a team [that has often been operating at cross-purposes](#). It is probably too much to expect that the administration will implement the structural reforms to the U.S. national security institutional architecture that have been called for, mantra-like, since Sept. 11. Nonetheless, the executive branch has already adopted, in theory, an interagency and whole-of-government approach to global challenges. In practice, the success of that approach still depends on individual personalities working together. That has not been the case during Obama's first term. The team of rivals approach to national security appointments should now give way to building a complementary and smoothly functioning team of partners.

The second urgent issue that must be addressed is the lack of a consistent and coherent approach to military interventions in humanitarian crises in which the U.S. either does not have a strategic interest at stake, or where there is clearly no cost-effective way to ensure a strategically desirable outcome. This is in part a Sisyphean task for a country like America, whose self-image includes a global responsibility for defending a universalist vision, and whose military alone has the capabilities to actually fulfill that responsibility. The very nature of global affairs, too, at times requires improvised and ad hoc responses to unforeseeable crises and intractable problems. Solutions are a rarity, which is why we more often speak of crisis management, rather than crisis resolution. But for the past two years, the Obama administration has been visibly handicapped by the conflict between its pragmatic and idealist instincts. The national debate over liberal interventionism will no doubt continue for many years to come. The debate within the administration must not. Obama must choose, setting the administration's line, for better or worse, for the next four years.

On a related issue, that of the U.S. military's role in the post-Iraq and post-Afghanistan era, Obama must similarly lay out a vision, not just of America's strategic interests, which has been effectively articulated [with the shift to Asia](#), but also of how the U.S. military will help achieve those objectives. For the past decade, the discussion of the military's role has been dominated by the operational urgencies of fighting two wars, with the 1990s-era revolution in military affairs (RMA) giving way to the 2000s-era emphasis on counterinsurgency. It increasingly seems, however, as if the military's dramatic transformation to a boot-heavy, population-centric force will end up as little more than a strategic parenthesis. It is almost unimaginable that a U.S. president will deploy such a mission in the coming years. Whatever lessons have been learned in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to be institutionally preserved only by the units carrying out U.S. training

missions with partner militaries, mainly in Africa.

What we are left with are, on one end of the spectrum, conventional “big wars” against near-peer rivals (read: China) and, on the other, manpower-intensive, low-intensity stabilization missions. Both, by their very nature, are too costly to engage. For the foreseeable future, then, the military will be reduced to picking the asymmetric fruits of the RMA tree, namely armed drones operating in conjunction with covert special operations forces in the broad middle spectrum of small and irregular shadow wars. For its core competences, however, the U.S. military has become a very expensive tool destined to remain in the box. The service branches will all come up with good reasons for keeping the money taps open. Obama would do well to deliver a much-needed peace dividend to the U.S. private sector, both in terms of defense procurement, but also in terms of rendering the shadow wars more accountable.

Finally, Obama should use his second term to revisit the initial emphasis on engagement with which he began his first term. At the time, the “open hand” was in many ways driven by the need to divest himself and America of the burden of his predecessor’s unilateral and confrontational legacy. Though applauded by America’s partners and friends, it was perhaps misinterpreted as weakness by the intended audience, America’s rivals and enemies. The intervening years have demonstrated Obama’s resolve when it comes to taking hard decisions in defense of American interests, as well as his ability to mobilize broad international coalitions to advance them. Having proved his toughness and America’s enduring strength, he now has the opportunity to again extend an open hand. The prospects for a nuclear deal with Iran, in particular, seem more promising than they have in years. With Venezuela, too, there is an opportunity to initiate a dialogue focused on addressing common challenges and pursuing mutual advantages. And as China enters what will likely be a febrile period of new leadership, the time is right for a conciliatory posture to lower the tensions that have damaged trust over the past few years.

It would be unfair to characterize Obama’s first-term foreign policy as a failure, and it bears noting that many of the disappointments were due to factors beyond his control. Nonetheless, the overall image is one of indecision when it comes to formulating policy and tentativeness when it comes to implementing it. Winning re-election has opened a window of opportunity for Obama to take a bolder approach, but he should act quickly, for it will not remain open for long. □

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*Photo: President Barack Obama with his national security and intelligence team in the Situation Room, January 2009. (White House photo by Pete Souza).*

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