

# The Legacy of Obama's Foreign Policy

Barack Obama's foreign policy has been marked by two main principles: First of all, military reticence and improved burden-sharing with allies and partners; secondly, the offer of dialog for enemies such as Cuba or Iran. The strategic focus has shifted from Europe to the Middle East to Asia. However, from 2011 onwards, the Arab Winter and the crisis in Ukraine impeded the realization of Obama's "grand strategy".

By Christian Nünlist

Former US President George W. Bush left his successor a grim legacy of two wars and a crisis in the financial markets. Barack Obama, on the other hand, will likely be remembered as a president who primarily concerned himself with domestic policy and overcame an economic disaster that was without parallel in recent memory.

There are those who criticize that in foreign policy, Obama all too often only responded to events rather than pursuing an overarching strategy. In truth, however, Obama pursued two clear strategic principles: The US was to maintain its global leadership role and hegemonial position, but at a lower cost and while passing on a greater share of the burden to its allies and partners. Citing his public opposition to a war in Iraq in 2002, Obama had announced during his election campaign in 2008 that he would withdraw US troops from Iraq and strengthen the military engagement in Afghanistan instead. Moreover, he held out the prospect of dialog with countries such as Cuba and Iran, which had been viewed for decades as arch-enemies by the US.

After winning the election, President Obama followed up on his campaign promises consistently. The strategic retreat from the Middle East and the shift of emphasis towards Asia, together with diplomatic engagement of adversaries, became important pillars of his foreign policy. This strategy brought successes such as agreement in the



After eight years, President Barack Obama will have to move out of the White House in January 2017.  
*Pete Souza / The White House*

nuclear dispute with Iran, the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba, or a new trade agreement with Asian and Latin American states. At the same time, Obama allowed actors such as Russia, China, or the "Islamic State" (IS) to exploit power vacuums created by his restraint.

## His Own George Kennan

In 2009, President Obama had to adapt US foreign policy to new realities. He understood that in the long term, the US's global

power rests on its economic performance. Bush's wars had severely depleted the nation's coffers; these costs had to be reduced. At the same time, the new administration had to restore momentum to the US economy through an ambitious reform program. In foreign policy, from the very beginning, Obama consistently built on two overarching principles: *First*, a policy of engagement designed to restore global confidence in the US, which had been severely tarnished during the Bush era. This involved

not only a restoration of damaged relations with transatlantic partners, but also tenacious diplomacy with Washington's adversaries. Due to his personal background, Obama was the first US president that managed to connect credibly with the non-Western world. *Secondly*, after overreaching itself both strategically and militarily during the Bush years, the US was to exercise its global leadership role in a less expensive and more efficient way. Longstanding military stabilization operations were avoided, military force was employed more discreetly, and allies and partners were to make more significant contributions.

Obama's foreign policy was not conceived by a strategic thinker like Henry Kissinger – Obama was his own foreign minister. In a 2014 interview, he stated confidently: "I don't really need George Kennan right now." His grand strategy is clearly discernible from a series of speeches laying out the foundations of his foreign policy and was codified in the national security strategies of 2010 and 2015.

### Engaging Adversaries in Dialog

For his efforts to bring about a new, positive atmosphere in international relations and his vision of a nuclear-free world, Obama was rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize already in fall of 2009. Speaking in Cairo in June 2009, he announced a new beginning in relations between the US and the Muslim world. When the Iranian re-

for nuclear arms control; Moscow agreed to the deployment of US personnel and materiel to Afghanistan; the tightening of UN sanctions in the nuclear dispute with Iran gained Russian support; for the Obama administration, NATO expansion into the post-Soviet space was no longer a priority; and in the UN Security Council, Moscow refrained from using its veto in the 2011 decision on an intervention in Libya. However, this success story came to an end with the Russian parliamentary election of 2011. Mass protests against electoral fraud soon turned against Vladimir Putin himself. Fearing an "orange revolution" in Moscow, the Kremlin tightened its autocratic rule and stepped up its anti-Western propaganda.

Furthermore, in December 2014, Obama announced plans to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba, which had been suspended since 1961. As US-Cuban relations had been toxic since the Kennedy era, this détente can be regarded as a truly historic development.

### Pivot to Asia

However, Obama's policy of engagement did not apply to China. Since Kissinger's détente with Mao Zedong, US policy towards China has been a mixture of confrontational and cooperative elements. For Washington, China's economic and geopolitical rise constitutes the main long-term threat to national security. In recent years, the US has perceived Beijing's foreign policy, in particular in the South China Sea, as aggressive. In order to contain China's hegemonial ambitions, the Obama administration in November 2011 announced a "pivot" in US grand strategy that

would recalibrate the primary focus of attention and resources in foreign policy from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. Subsequently, the US increased its military presence in the Pacific – by 2020, 60 per cent of US air force and naval capabilities are to be concentrated in this region. At the same time, bilateral security ties with India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, and Australia were strengthened. Obama's National Security Strategy of 2015 reaffirmed the priority status of Asia, even after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

In June 2015, Obama secured the necessary parliamentary authorization for the conclusion of trade agreements and negotiating the Transpacific Partnership (TPP).

The free trade package, completed in September 2015 and encompassing the US, Japan, Vietnam, Australia, China, Peru, Mexico, and Canada, among others, will apply to 40 per cent of the world's economic output; by its non-consideration of China, it constitutes a clear geopolitical statement. Obama's trade-policy maneuver complements the Asian pivot and is one of the few legislative triumphs of his presidency. The TPP, which Washington hopes will be joined by a future trade agreement with Europe (TTIP), is intended to ensure that global trade continues to be conducted under a set of rules that favor US and Western corporations. Ultimately, the creation of a common front versus China contradicts Obama's general openness to dialog.

### Strategic Restraint

Senator Obama had rejected Bush's "dumb" Iraq war from the very start. Saddam Hussein, he argued, did not constitute an imminent threat to the US. Obama believed that the Iraq War was merely a distraction from the "necessary war" in Afghanistan. In February 2009, President Obama therefore announced that US combat troops would be withdrawn from Iraq by the end of 2011. In doing so, Obama benefited from the increase of troops ("surge") ordered by Bush in 2007, which had temporarily improved the security situation in Iraq and created the opportunity for Obama to initiate a retreat that, at least at the time, appeared to be a responsible move. Moreover, both the government and the people of Iraq had demanded an end of the US occupation. This allowed Obama to realize one of his core election promises.

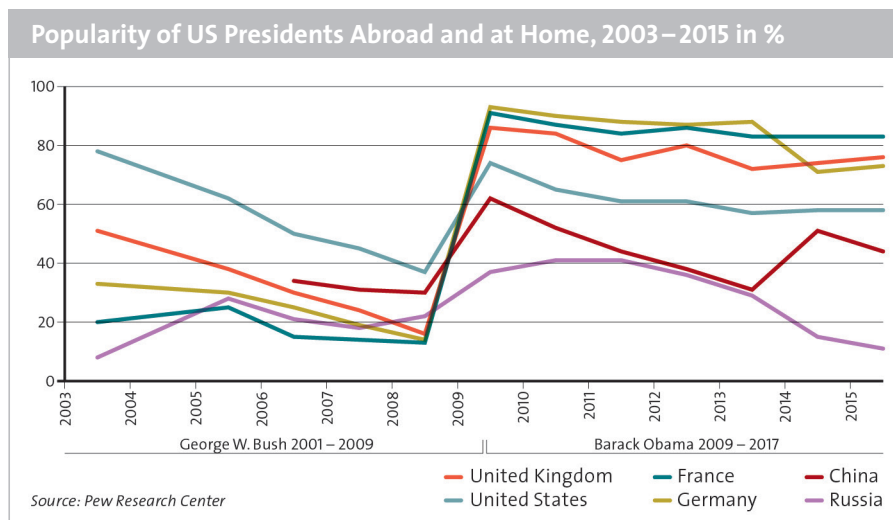
At the same time, in 2009, Obama temporarily instituted a massive increase of the US military engagement in Afghanistan, which he hoped would allow for a withdrawal from this theater of operations from 2011 onwards. From the end of 2014, the Afghans would be responsible for their own security. As Obama announced at the end of 2009, his priority was nation-building in the US itself.

The success in tracking down al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, who was killed in a risky military operation in Pakistan in May 2011, was one of Obama's biggest foreign-policy successes. At the time, against the backdrop of the Arab revolts, bin Laden's death seemed to mark a coda to the decade of terrorism following the 11 September 2001 attacks. Al-Qaida appeared to have lost its international attraction, not least because of the drone war that had

## Obama's Security Strategy of 2015 reaffirmed the priority status of Asia, even after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

gime soon thereafter suppressed the "Green Movement", Washington held back. At the same time, with regard to the Iranian nuclear program, sanctions were tightened in collaboration with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany. However, Obama's policy of engagement was not rewarded until after the election of the pragmatic leader Hassan Rohani as Iran's president. The agreement reached with Iran in Vienna in July 2015 was a success of Obama's dual-track approach combining tenacious diplomacy with painful economic sanctions.

Relations with Russia were "reset" in 2009. Initially, the offer of pragmatic, interest-based cooperation was a success: The US and Russia signed the New START Treaty



been intensified in the meantime: Obama's administration increased the number of combat drone missions from 52 (under Bush) to over 500. Drones seemed to be an efficient and effective tool in the campaign against jihadist terrorism that allowed Obama to withdraw US ground troops. However, the drone strikes in Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia touched upon sensitive issues of national sovereignty and fostered jihadist radicalization in the countries concerned. Moreover, the US thus created a dangerous precedent for the use of armed drones in third countries. It was only in May 2013 that Obama broke his silence on the secret drone program and "targeted assassinations". He transferred responsibility for the program from the CIA to the Pentagon and announced steps to improve control mechanisms for political oversight.

### Libya: Leading from Behind

In 2011, the Arab revolts created a dilemma for Obama's dual-track strategy of engagement and strategic restraint. On the one hand, the Arab societies were fighting in the streets for the values and freedoms Obama himself had promoted in his Cairo speech two years earlier; on the other hand, the repressive regimes that the protestors were fighting against had been strategic partners of the US and important allies in the struggle against al-Qaida. After some hesitation over this dilemma, Obama decided in February 2011 to withdraw support for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.

In the Libyan civil war, following a request by the Arab League and fearing a massacre in Benghazi, Obama favored a UN resolution to create a no-fly zone that paved the

way for air strikes by Western countries. The US assisted France, the UK, and other European states in their air war against the Gaddafi regime, "leading from behind", albeit while providing crucial assistance without which the Europeans would not have been able to conduct their war.

The Libya War perfectly suited Obama's strategic restraint and his desire for better transatlantic burden-sharing. The air strikes did not cause a single US casualty and, at the time, seemed to mark a perfect counterpoint to the Iraq War. However, just as in Iraq in 2003, there was no political plan for the period following a successfully executed military campaign and regime change. Accordingly, Obama currently faces the difficult decision of whether to push for a new Western military intervention in 2016 in order to prevent the IS from entrenching itself in Libya, too.

### The Limits of Obama's Strategy

The Ukraine Crisis and the spread of the IS significantly degraded the security situation beyond Europe's periphery in 2014, and have since jeopardized not just the basis of the desired pivot to Asia – i.e., a stable Europe including productive relations between the West and Russia. Since the annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in eastern Ukraine, Russia is increasingly viewed as a threat by Western observers. Therefore, the Baltic states and other Eastern European countries are demanding stronger US engagement to deter Russian aggression.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, too, there are signs that the military retreat from the

Middle East, which was required for the strategy of rebalancing, may have been premature. One irony of history is that after the 9/11 attacks, Bush had conjured up a non-existent link between al-Qaida and Iraq, but that al-Qaida has indeed now established a presence in the country as a result of the Iraq war. As such, unlike in 2002/2003, the Iraq War was not really a "dumb war" anymore at the start of the Obama era.

Moreover, Washington was caught completely by surprise by the capture of Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, by the IS in June 2014, following the withdrawal of US forces in 2011. The fact that the Iraqi military was unable to deal with the presence of jihadists suggests that Iraqi president Maliki initially tolerated the presence of the IS in his own country in order to continue receiving US military aid. Indeed, Obama ordered a return of some US forces to Iraq. Since September 2014, the US has also been fighting the IS in Syria and in Iraq with air strikes.

In the Afghanistan War, Obama attempted to apply the lessons learned in Vietnam and Iraq. A creeping Americanization of the war was to be avoided. The US aims in Afghanistan were once more reduced to combating al-Qaida and the Taliban; nation-building and democratization were no longer priorities. While the Obama administration acknowledged the necessity of regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theater of war, the debate within the administration in 2009 was exclusively about military options. The Pentagon received the means for a troop increase, but only for a limited period and for narrowly defined goals in Afghanistan. Yet, the US did not design a strategy for the whole region. With the resurgence of the Taliban and the rise of the IS, Obama's withdrawal timetable was thwarted in Afghanistan, too. The mission of the currently 9,800 US troops there is to prevent the country once more becoming a refuge for terrorists.

The Syria War revealed even more clearly the limits of Obama's strategy for keeping the US out of the wars in the Middle East. The difference to the Libyan intervention was palpable: Syria had capable, integrated armed forces and a modern air defense system as well as chemical weapons. The strongest opposition group consisted of jihadists whom the West was reluctant to arm. When Western intelligence confirmed that President Bashar al-Assad had in August 2013 carried out an attack with



## Recommended Reading

**David Milne: Worldmaking (2015)** In this intellectual history, British historian Milne offers balanced and unpolemical portraits of nine prominent US foreign-policy strategists, including George F. Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and – at the end of a 500-page book in small print – of Barack Obama.

**David Fitzgerald and David Ryan: Obama, US Foreign Policy and the Dilemmas of Intervention (2015)** In this concise and intelligent volume, two Irish historians analyze the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. Speaking soberly as outside analysts, they emphasize the importance of the (alleged) lessons from earlier wars for Obama's decisions.

**Jonathan Alter: The Promise (2010)** Six years after its appearance, this remains the seminal book for understanding the Obama presidency, especially his handling of the huge challenges of his first year in office and the radical obstruction policy of the Republicans from day one. In foreign policy matters, the focus is on the Afghanistan debate. The book is based on interviews with Obama himself and his most important advisors.

poison gas that killed 1429 civilian victims, and thus crossed a "red line" drawn by Obama the year before, the US president considered military strikes against the Syrian regime. However, there was disunity both within the US government and among the G-20; moreover, unlike in the case of Libya, both Russia and China prevented a UN resolution, while the US Congress demanded to have a say in the matter. Obama needed the support of the Congress for the desired nuclear deal with Iran.

In the midst of this situation, Russia proposed that Assad was to give up his chemical weapons arsenal. When the Syrian dictator signaled his willingness to make a deal, Obama could avoid a military operation after all. Subsequently, Syria's chemical weapons were destroyed under international supervision. The civil war, however, continued. Obama's critics believe the failure to enforce his red line against Assad se-

verely damaged US credibility in the Middle East. This, they believe, created an opportunity for Russia and Iran to step into the vacuum created by US restraint.

### A Solid Strategy

Despite problems with the implementation of his foreign-policy strategy, when he leaves office at the beginning of 2017, Obama will leave behind a country more prosperous, stronger, and safer than it was when his presidency began in 2009. The US has the world's biggest economy and one of the highest growth rates in the West. It remains the center of the liberal Western world order. Despite austerity, its defense budget is as large as those of the next seven countries combined.

While there was no official "Obama doctrine" between 2009 and 2016, the president's foreign-policy vision was underpinned by strategic deliberation. His foreign policy has been marked by awareness that the US has less and less resources at its disposal for dealing with increasingly complex challenges. Therefore, the president narrowed down the country's strategic interests and focused on especially urgent foreign policy problems. This necessarily led to diminished US influence in civil wars that were not of vital interest to the US – in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

On the other hand, Obama reacted to China's more assertive foreign and military policy with a geostrategic pivot to Asia. Thanks to patient and persistent diplomacy, the Obama administration has probably averted the threat of an Iranian nuclear bomb for at least ten years. Obama responded forcefully, but without risky provocations to Russia's aggression in Ukraine with economic sanctions and a reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank. Reluctantly, Obama also increased again US military engagement in Iraq and in Afghanistan in order to pursue the "necessary war" against globally active jihadist terrorists with more than just drones.

Instead of using military might, Obama preferred engagement and negotiations, multilateralism, burden-sharing, and collective responses to global problems and challenges. In Europe, his demand for burden-sharing has not fallen on deaf ears. German Chancellor Angela Merkel played a leading role in the attempt to resolve the Ukraine crisis diplomatically. The Europeans are also extending more military support to the US than they used to when it comes to measures for enhancing reassurance and deterrence within NATO and for the fight against the IS. The US contribution remains indispensable for the success of Western operations, as the Libya War has shown. Yet, the continuing mass exodus from the Middle East and Africa is weakening the West and constitutes an existential challenge for the EU.

Obama's foreign policy strongly resembles the pragmatic policies of Nixon and Kissinger that led to the US withdrawal from Vietnam. Obama, too, defined interests more narrowly and balanced US foreign policy with his ambitious domestic reform agenda. His insight that Bush's wars threatened the economic foundations of US power is also reminiscent of Eisenhower's emphasis on the importance of economic solvency for US foreign policy.

For eight years, the Republican Party has pursued a strategy of fundamental obstruction against Obama's policies. If a Republican were to win the White House, the US might return to a more confrontational foreign policy in 2017. Then, at least, some may think back with nostalgia to Obama's measured, though not flawless foreign policy.

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