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Foreign Policy in Obama's Second Term: Between Continuity and Legacy

Obama's first term as president was characterized by several disappointments and notable policy failures. Nonetheless, much of the disappointment resulted from his pragmatic compromises and incremental policy building. These quiet successes have laid the foundations for the more inspiring institutional changes he is likely to pursue during his second term. Yet in focusing on building his legacy, we can expect an even less confrontational stance on international matters in areas where conflict is likely and relative neglect of those areas which he has no previous success to build upon.

Four years ago, when a young Barack Obama took the presidency, bringing with him an inexperienced National Security Staff (NSS), we had little idea of the foreign policy he would pursue beyond idealist visions that sounded good in speeches but were bound to be difficult to translate into policy. Now, at the dawn of his second term, we have a four year track record to look back upon in order to determine what defines the Obama Doctrine. From this we can get a good idea of what four more years of Obama means for American foreign policy and the implications for Europe.

The Obama Doctrine

Despite the idealism of candidate Obama, his foreign policy as president has been characterized by pragmatism and indeed realism. Even while winding down big wars, he has escalated and expanded the 'drone war'. He has been cautious in condemning the sins of allies and the strong. His agreements have been characterized by compromise and incremental improvements on the status quo. His crisis management has been cautious and flexible. This divergence from ideals has led some to question whether he has a strategy at all. Nonetheless, a vision remains, even if it is unimplemented. Obama believes in the strength of America while recognizing the very limitations and vulnerabilities that come with hegemony. He recognizes that America has not always been true to its values, which opens up the possibility to recognize and correct mistakes. He believes there are multiple paths to liberalism and freedom and attempts to channel rising powers towards the destination regardless of the route. He does so by attempting to reinforce the power and legitimacy of international institutions. But his preference for multilateralism has not

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meant that the unilateral tools of foreign policy have gone unused. While Obama has shown more hesitancy to use military force than his predecessor, he has still exercised hard power. The main difference is that force has been used in more complex arrangements: supporting military action in Libya from behind, expanding drone attacks while opening negotiations with the Taliban, pushing the limits of sovereignty in one case and considering it inviolable in another. Part of this arrangement has also been the expanded use of "economic statecraft", including the stick of sanctions and the carrot of free trade agreements.

The Foundation Built

So what has this pragmatic approach to his grand vision achieved? When set against the idealist rhetoric and promises of his campaign Obama's achievements seem meagre. Indeed, some of the current "challenges" in the world are a result of the very hope he unleashed. Promising the Palestinians a state, they continue to pursue it even though the US stepped back. His moral tone gave hope to protesters and pause to generals during the Arab Spring ... a spring which now may be burning out of control. Raised expectations have been replaced by reality and disappointment, the very recipe for revolution. While this criticism is deserved, the achievements deserve recognition also. Together these successes form the foundation upon which Obama will build his legacy. On the other hand, the clear failures are likely to be ignored; at best these fires will be smoothed but left to smoulder in the roots.

Clear failures include the stalled Israel-Palestine peace process. The recent climate summits have produced

few tangible results. Negotiations with North Korea over its nuclear programme have stalled. Relations with Pakistan have deteriorated. Guantanamo Bay detention camp remains open. Mixed cases include Iran and its nuclear ambitions. The sanctions, with full UNSC backing, are taking their toll. Yet Iran could - if it so chooses - cross the red line in the next four years; thus a showdown is imminent. Russia seems a failure based on rhetoric and its domestic politics, but there are concrete policy successes here: a new START treaty, cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan, accession to the WTO. China is also a mixed success. Relations are good overall. Progress has been especially made on currency and trade issues. But there are increasingly frequent 'incidents', most recently the tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. While to date these incidents have not escalated, they have raised the temperature in the region.

Obama's first golden star for foreign policy is his protection of American, and likely also European, security via a renewed focus on taking down Al Qaeda. Obama's economic policy is his other golden star. He successfully prevented a post-Lehman backlash against US-led liberal institutions and ideas and ensured there was no retreat into nationalistic beggar-thy-neighbour economics. This was attained primarily through the G20 rather than the G8 and represents a successful engagement between established and rising powers. He also concluded several important free trade agreements. Improved relations with Europe have also been evident. Obama's tone and values alone made such improvement inevitable following the Bush years, but normative concepts have led to real results. The US and EU are in near lockstep on Iran, as they were on Libya where the US encouraged the EU to lead.

The Legacy to Come

In his search for continuity in his foreign policy, Obama would like to keep his team together for his next term. This will not happen. Obama's first term exhibited less personnel turnover in senior staff than most administrations, thus the first year of his new term is likely to see a change in leadership in the Departments of State, Treasury, Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security. In one way this does not matter; Obama and his NSS keep a tighter reign on policy and cabinet-level officials than the typical administration, so changes in the departments will matter less. However, if the new department leadership cannot

operate within the limits imposed by the White House or work with the strong-willed persons in the NSS, then clashes are likely. In the unlikely event there is turnover in the NSS, then we may see larger policy shifts.

While American foreign policy is generally the remit of the president, the gridlock that has paralyzed Washington the past two years is set to continue and will have implications for foreign policy. Sequestration could become reality, risking America's fragile recovery and sending turmoil into international markets. Congress could undermine Obama's multilateralism by cutting off funds to international institutions, as it has done before. International aid and even defence spending could also be victims, while needed structural reforms - especially in the State Department - will not occur. This weakness at home means Obama could have fewer tools for policy making abroad, yet it could also led him to become more engaged abroad in an effort to escape gridlock at home. We may even see attempts to circumvent DC gridlock by entering into foreign treaties with domestic implications, especially economic in nature.

It is important to note how a president builds a legacy. It is rarely through actions, the unexpected crisis aside, but rather through institution building. Actions have too many unforeseeable consequences. Institutions, on the other hand, can ensure a president's policy becomes permanent. The first institution we can expect Obama to further is the UN. Given his overly liberal interpretation of the Libya resolution, this will require some effort, and much restraint by the Americans no matter the temptation for unilateral action. Obama is likely to continue to address the looming problem of Iran's nuclear programme through the UN and possibly even to use the Iranian issue to drive reforms and an expansion of the UN's powers. While it has long been talked of, UN and even UNSC reform may be more likely now than they have ever been. A strengthened UN is a key part of Obama's strategy to constrain yet not limit rising powers and tie them to the status quo.

The second part of this 'rising power management strategy' is even more likely to be successful. This is tying them to the liberal economic order. Though the WTO will play a role, expect Obama to build on his success in the G20 and to also seek more free trade agreements. Once the world economy, especially in the

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Eurozone, has stabilized somewhat, there will also be a short window for larger reforms of the international economic order – perhaps even system-wide paradigmatic reforms. This window will also exist if the economies nosedive again, but in this case, the dangers are higher and the paradigm shift could be less favourable. Importantly, Obama's economic statecraft is not purely benevolent, indeed it is somewhat Machiavellian. Its ultimate purpose is to bolster the American economic position and ensure continued American economic leadership (and thereby latent military potential) even if political leadership is shared through multilateral institutions.

Europe figures less in Obama's pro-active foreign policy. Yet, despite criticism from Republicans, this is not so much out of neglect as out of respect, but also a certain amount of taking for granted that he 'had Europe at hello'. Obama hopes to see a self-reliant Europe as a partner, not a post-modern paradise dependant on America. He will continue to encourage the EU's independent development, even in security and defence. The latter may even be forced upon Europe, as the possibility exists that Obama will further reduce the US military presence in Europe, possibly including the removal of the remaining nuclear warheads. Missile defence programmes will be exempt from this general cutback. All these programmes will be attempted first with Russian input, the post-re-election "flexibility" Obama promised Putin. Whether Putin is also flexible as well will depend on the success of his own domestic programmes, especially military reform (e.g. command and control) and modernization (e.g. of its nuclear programme).

Recommendations

1. Obama second term will be focused on implementing his domestic agenda in the face of strong opposition. He will have correspondingly less time for foreign policy, where he will focus on a few key areas and projects. His legacy will be built by constructing, reforming, or strengthening multi-lateral institutions, such as the G20 and UN. Europe can be a partner in this institution building but

should avoid duplication of effort, partially because the US agenda would overwhelm the EU's voice. The EU should focus on building other institutions, especially in Europe and with its neighbours (including Russia).

2. Obama is unlikely to respond more forcefully to events, at least until his main agendas are well in progress. Until then, Europe should be prepared to play a larger role in international crisis management. Additionally, Obama is likely to use crises as catalysts for institutional change. In the event of an international crisis, the EU should already be thinking of the implications it could have for institutions so that the US does not present the only post-crisis plan as a *fait accompli*. An example is the potential of the looming crisis over Iran's nuclear programme to lead to revisions in the arms control and non-proliferation regimes.

3. Obama lacks a clear Russia strategy. Europe should fill in for him on the economic front, including supporting Russian military modernization (e.g. the Mistral ship deal) to decrease Russian insecurities and increase their negotiating flexibility. This will allow the US to focus on the military front (where Russia will accept only the US as an equal partner). Nonetheless, on the military front the EU can help mediate on the controversial US missile shield, for instance by "nudging" stationing options in a direction acceptable to Russia or by encouraging Obama to withdraw US tactical nuclear weapons from Europe, thereby altering the missile defence calculations.

4. Europe has done a good job at taking advantage of emerging markets and it should not let Obama's Asia pivot lead to a Pacific economic zone from which it is excluded. Though controversial, Europe could even play on China's concern about what this pivot means in order to secure benefits for the EU. However, to take full advantage of this the EU should review its embargo on the sale of military and dual-use technology to China.

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