

OBAMA'S FOREIGN POLICY: HOW TO RESCUE IT

US President Barack Obama's foreign policy has received heavy criticism in recent years. Although he is occasionally lauded for "ending America's wars," a closer look at polling results reveals public discontentment with Obama's core principle: the removal of military action from the American foreign policy toolkit. Indeed, Obama has opted not to use any sort of military action or assistance on multiple occasions. In this article, Jeffrey lays out a specific agenda Obama could implement for a stronger American foreign policy: a continued focus on diplomacy, with careful consideration of military options.

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US President Barack Obama was elected on a platform to end the Iraq War and to better pursue the so-called war on terror and the subsidiary conflict in Afghanistan. He simultaneously had to take on the residual domestic economic and social challenges from the Bush Administration. The President approached the latter mission with gusto, albeit often restrained by the Republican Party majority in the House of Representatives. And while he certainly ended the war in Iraq – and hopes to have all troops out of Afghanistan by the end of 2016 – he is being criticized on foreign policy issues by most of the US’s allies. Such critics include German Chancellor Angela Merkel over US spying, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for, in Netanyahu’s view, maintaining too close an approach to Hamas during the 2014 Gaza fighting; and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for a variety of reasons. Meanwhile, the US’s real and potential foes – Al Qaeda, Iran, China, and Russia – march on in Syria, Iraq, the South China Sea, and eastern Ukraine. Diplomatic successes are rare and fragile – a temporary agreement on the Iranian nuclear program and, after many false starts, European and American sanctions against Putin that actually hurt – or else are seemingly reversed, as in the killing of Osama bin Laden being trumped by the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

One domestic consequence of Obama’s foreign policy has been near universal criticism in the American media, with only a few mainstream editorial pages (*New York Times*) and left-of-center pundits sometimes supporting his actions. Moreover, while most polling shows that the American public is deeply discouraged with foreign military engagements after Iraq and Afghanistan and have low confidence – certainly below 50 percent – in President Obama’s handling of foreign policy, despite the popularity of his “ending America’s wars” rhetoric.¹

So, what is going on here? Clearly, unlike most presidents, Obama is not pursuing a pragmatic policy based on what works (disasters around the world bear witness to the US’s string of failures), or what is popular (his sinking poll numbers on foreign policy attest to that), but rather what he thinks is right. President Obama, in short, is leading an ideological campaign to remove military action effectively from the American foreign policy toolkit. He suggested as much in debating Hillary Clinton during the Democratic Party Presidential primary race in early 2008, stating that he not only wanted to end wars, but the thinking that led to them.

In almost a dozen situations, Obama has opted not to use any sort of military action or assistance – however limited and low cost. From “leading from behind” in Libya,

¹ Lucy McCalmont, “Poll: Obama sinks on foreign policy,” *Politico*, 5 August 2014, <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/08/poll-barack-obama-sinks-foreign-policy-109743.html>

to suggesting in June he would attack the advancing ISIS forces in Iraq, but by only acted, very limited, to protect Americans at risk in Erbil, and Yazidis facing genocide. He decided to pull all troops out of Afghanistan by the end of 2016 when the American public (and the overwhelming majority of Afghans) wants some of them to stay. He has not followed through on any of his commitments concerning Syria. Obama has refrained from bombing in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government; he has refrained from arming moderate insurgents; and he also refused to provide weapons to the beleaguered Ukraine government.

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Over the past few months, in his speech in Kabul, in a press conference in Manila, and in a major foreign policy speech at West Point, the President provided the intellectual foundations for his unwillingness to use any sort of military action, be it limited air strikes such as envisaged against Syria, arming those whose causes the US supports, or deterring foes through its own military deployments. Dramatic developments – Putin’s aggression and ISIS’s rise, is putting these intellectual foundations under stress and produced some very limited action. But the battle for President Obama’s worldview is not yet over. In these and other remarks, Obama termed almost any military action a possible “slippery slope” heading towards another Iraq. In his West Point speech he made the point twice, first stating that, since World War II, some of America’s biggest mistakes have involved military adventures without considering the consequences. He then compared the military to a hammer, explaining to his audience that “not every problem is a nail.”

There is nothing wrong per se with these statements, but in a complex world they are too simplistic. Of course the US has made repeated serious military mistakes since 1945, from invading North Korea in 1950 to Vietnam, and then Iraq. But, as the President himself noted in a speech in September 2013, it is also true that for seven decades the US has been the “anchor” of global stability, not only with words but actions. Finally, it is true that while not all problems are nails, some are.

But here we run into yet another aspect of the President’s thinking. Even if the problem is a “nail,” (i.e., a military challenge) he simply cannot believe that a military response (i.e., “a hammer”) will have any practical effect. Two leading political observers in recent days have spelled out the problem: Charles Krauthammer

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noted in the *Washington Post* on 24 July that President Obama “disdains realpolitik because he believes that in the end such primitive notions as conquest are self-defeating. History sees to their defeat... If you really believe this, then there is no need for forceful, potentially risky US counteractions.”² Professor Eliot Cohen, writing in the same paper on 31 July, thought the problem was even more basic:

It is that the Obama administration simply cannot accept that war is war. This explains, among other things, the debacle of our Libya policy (...) explains the administration’s declarations that drone strikes in Pakistan and the assassination of Osama bin Laden had brought al-Qaeda to the edge of strategic defeat (...) explains our hand-wringing over the slaughter of some 200,000 people in Syria as if it were a massive Ebola outbreak (...) explains the long, disgraceful appeasement of Vladimir Putin and the administration’s continuing reluctance to say, simply, that Russia is waging war against a sovereign neighbor.³

Not all the problems the world faces today can be resolved by American military force – whether massive, limited, or indirect – but we live in a world where, as Obama himself has conceded, international security has been maintained in good part by the US. This has been evidenced by military action in areas such as the Gulf, Korea, Kosovo, Bosnia, and Kuwait for decades. Removing that key element from the international equation obviously unleashes forces, as well as opportunities to profit from the ensuing violence, that are inimical to universal values, the UN Charter, and global peace.

By 2017, the US will have a new president. Without the specific ideological mindset that defines the current president’s actions, the US will almost certainly take a different approach to global security. But fires are already burning around the world today, and even more serious conflagrations could break out between now and then.

2 Charles Krauthammer, “The vacant presidency,” *The Washington Post*, 24 July 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-the-vacant-presidency/2014/07/24/0b110fdc-1363-11e4-9285-4243a40ddc97_story.html

3 Eliot A. Cohen, “Obama does not accept war for what it is,” *The Washington Post*, 31 July 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/eliot-cohen-obama-does-not-accept-war-for-what-it-is/2014/07/31/8f27346e-1830-11e4-9e3b-7f2f110c6265_story.html

Some of the frictions involve disputes between nuclear armed states, and a few are approaching the borders of the US's treaty allies, such as Japan, Turkey, and Poland. If these allies were dragged into a conflict, America, no matter who its president was, could find itself at war. To avoid that, US policy has been focused on “managing” the areas beyond our treaty allies. For decades, the US has been working to contain and defuse crises before finding itself in a war far worse than Iraq or Vietnam. The problem is that President Obama, all but eschewing any role for the military, is reluctant to carry out such management.

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While it would be difficult, there is a way forward that would not require a major deviation from President Obama's philosophy. We have to accept that he will not change his core views. However, he could change his specific policies if he believes that they will be successful and would not challenge his fervent position that the US not get involved in any new major conflict with ground troops that would result in huge costs and casualties like Iraq and Afghanistan. The “adjustment” over the next two years would focus on helping others, and give new meaning to red lines.

The President, despite not following through on the Syrian chemical weapons “red line,” continues to cite the term in discussing the Iranian nuclear program, in regard to disputed islands off the coast of China, and with our NATO allies in reference to Russia. If Obama were to explain to the American people the logic for such red lines and underline his willingness to act when they are crossed, he could “reset” much of our security agenda. He would have to do so not only through statements but also by military deployments and diplomacy – including diplomacy with the Russians, Iranians, and Chinese – to resolve problems if possible and ensure that misunderstandings do not trigger confrontations. To be sure, the President and his administration are doing bits and pieces of this, but it is being done without an overarching approach. The closest thing to an “overarching approach” within the administration now is the rejection of the use of force. This approach is directly counterproductive to the strategy of designating red lines.

Direct action, albeit only of the most limited kind, is more difficult to “fit” with his worldview. To be sure the President authorized limited strikes to protect Yazidi

Kurds besieged on Sinjar mountain and to protect American personnel in Erbil, and after a new Iraqi prime minister was nominated, approved 100 more military advisors. But we have no assurance that he will commit sufficient air power and advisors to stop the continuing ISIS push into Shiite, Kurdish, and Christian areas. Likewise, at West Point, the President promised 500 million dollars for the Syrian resistance. If he “gave gas” to this initiative, it could produce results fairly quickly – likewise with support to hard-pressed governments in Africa facing Al Qaeda movements. The US is fortunate to have France in the lead in that area, but generous American help would underline its joint commitments to African security.

President Obama is right that diplomacy should be in the lead. But diplomacy needs help, be it economic or military. The above steps would strengthen our diplomacy and rebuild relations with Turkey, the Gulf States, Israel, and nervous Eastern European and East Asian states who have come to doubt the US’s grit. Certainly, give priority to diplomacy, but let’s provide it with military options.

The agenda sketched out in the last three paragraphs, if associated with “traditional” US presidents, would be seen as a “boilerplate” or “normal” posture for American foreign policy. With President Obama, it unfortunately would be a departure. In his first term, initially in Libya and then with the surge in Afghanistan and the attack on bin Laden, he showed flexibility. It is time to show flexibility once again. None of the above actions and policies would even remotely risk another Iraq. Together, they would help to repair relations around the world and contribute to global security now much endangered.