

Obama no foreign policy ace, but he's not flunking it

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President Barack Obama's critics are in full, happy cry over his performance on Syria and even his apologists are troubled by it. Vladimir Putin, the macho man of Siberia, has upstaged Mr. Obama, the hapless Hamlet on the Potomac, or so the narrative goes. But before we just write off Mr. Obama for flunking foreign policy, it is worth taking another look at his objectives, his constraints and his accomplishments. None is trivial.

Mr. Obama came to office believing that nation-building begins at home, that the U.S. could not afford to solve its domestic problems and the world's challenges by itself, that the U.S. needed a smaller foreign policy not a bigger military, and that it was in the U.S. interest to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally, including when using force. His priorities were, and remain, resolutely domestic, above all providing health care coverage for most of the 47 million Americans who lacked it, surmounting the worst recession in eighty years, reviving flagging middle class economic opportunity, supporting the nation's education and science infrastructure and preserving a physical environment under threat. Mr. Obama's initial foreign policy goals included rebuilding global financial systems, addressing the challenges of climate change, reducing the number of nuclear weapons and preventing their proliferation, and ending American military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. He ran on a platform of ending wars, not starting them.

Negative current media commentary notwithstanding, Mr. Obama has had notable successes. Although criticized by deficit Ayatollahs on the right for going too far and by stimulus believers on the left for doing too little, he has presided over the recovery of the U.S. economy from the worst financial crisis since the Thirties. He was proved right in resisting calls – including by Canada – at the Toronto G20 summit to focus on fiscal consolidation over growth, a course followed by the U.K. and much of Europe that is leading them to a decade of underperformance, job loss and hardship. On climate change, at Copenhagen he engineered American and Chinese engagement in a file that lacked both, and has held off approving the Keystone pipeline, to the chagrin of Canadian governments and oil interests, until the consequent oil sands development is shown not to be malign. In endorsing the call of Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Bill Parry and Sam Nunn to retain the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, he has shaped all subsequent decisions on nuclear policy. Absent such a decision, everyone's nuclear calculus would have changed, and the goal would have been rendered moot. He has concluded a nuclear weapons agreement with Russia and secured an agreement among 44 countries with nuclear facilities to control nuclear material. He extricated U.S. forces from Iraq, established a schedule to do the same in Afghanistan, backstopped NATO's ridding the world of Libya's Moammer Gaddafi and furthering the norm of Responsibility to Protect in the process, and transformed the unwinnable war on terror into a wageable war on al-Qaeda and its derivatives, albeit by having recourse to the legally and morally dubious means of drone warfare. He has killed the iconic terrorist Osama Bin Laden and 13 of 20 of his lieutenants. He has strengthened sanctions on Teheran while resisting heavy Israeli pressure to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities. Further, he has skillfully worked with Beijing to curtail the certifiably dangerous Kim Yong-un's insane threats against Seoul, at least for the time being.

These achievements have come in the face of the worst economic conditions in nearly a century and over the opposition of war weary isolationists, unilateralist Cold Warriors, Blame America Firsters, gun-lovers, immigration haters, crackpot "birthers", the Tea Party, and Occupy Wall Street, altogether the intellectual inheritors of the Know Nothings of another age. Republican opposition,

whose single most important priority, as Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell put it, had been to make him a one-term president, has been unrelenting. The notoriously difficult task of governing in dysfunctional Washington has been worsened by a progressively ideologically divided Congress, and a Senate that is hamstrung by filibuster conventions and unable to ratify international treaties. No international treaty has been ratified by the current Congress, and nearly 40 treaties remain on the Senate docket, many having languished there for decades.

Mr. Obama's foreign policy has suffered setbacks, some of them important, along the way, mostly in the Middle East. Policy outcomes on the Palestinian issue especially have not yet matched Mr. Obama's initial promising rhetoric, and the odds are lengthening that they ever will. His administration has struggled to figure out what the right side of history is on the Arab awakening and how to get onto it, alienating secular and sectarian alike. He has been late in appreciating the mounting human and strategic costs of inaction on Syria and left too much of the job to others. His personal engagement on Syria has been episodic, eschewing the post Cold War role of World's Policeman that others continue to thrust at him. He has rolled the dice on Congressional support for military action and acquiesced in Mr. Putin's de facto bargain that will neutralize Mr. Assad's chemical weapons in exchange for the dictator's keeping his throne, and head, leaving the outgunned opposition to its own devices. Mr. Obama has made it abundantly clear that there will be no major American military response to Assad's brutal prosecution of the civil war and no overt intervention to save the innocent, absent further recourse by Assad to chemical weapons. While Obama seems likely to succeed with Russia's help in strengthening the Chemical Weapons Convention, an otherwise major accomplishment, the costs will have been high.

In broad strokes, Mr. Obama's foreign policy is not the failure his critics contend. It has produced significant results and also suffered some important setbacks, both. Mr. Obama has been without peer in the poetry of leadership but less effective in the prose of statecraft. He has not flunked foreign policy but he has not aced it either, in part because he has inherited a population drawn to isolationism, a consequence of Bush's foreign misadventures, and that is not likely to end soon. Mr. Obama's critics and apologists will need to recalculate what they expect of American leadership in a new era and what they themselves are willing to contribute to global order and progress. Syria is a good example of what happens, and what does not happen, when the U.S. turns inwards.

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