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FIIA BRIEFING PAPER 185 • October 2015



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI  
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET  
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## A LONG GAME HARRIED BY TACTICAL POLITICS



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FIIA Briefing Paper 185  
October 2015

- President Barack Obama's foreign policy has focused on achieving strategic aims, but it has been bedevilled by inconsistent implementation and harried by tactical politics. As a president, Obama has addressed and delivered successes in the five central goals he outlined as a candidate in 2008.
- The strongest criticism against changes in US foreign policy under the two Obama administrations has come from those who benefitted from the status quo. This is particularly true in the Middle East, where despite strong pressure President Obama has thus far avoided entangling the United States in new large-scale wars.
- While Europe was treated largely with disinterest during the first Obama administration, Russia's actions have served as a reminder that the US has deep security commitments in Europe which every president must uphold. Moreover, Obama's emphasis on the need for an economic alliance in the form of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) is a reminder that the transatlantic relationship is viewed as central in the 21st century.

The Global Security research programme  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

President Barack Obama may end up having the most transformative foreign policy presidency of any Democratic president since World War II. A focus on long-term goals evinces an ability to see the big picture and set broad goals. Tactical mistakes in policy or communication, such as the *ex tempore* setting of red lines regarding chemical weapons use, does not diminish Obama's success at bending the arc of history onto a path more favourable for the United States. Obama looks set to leave the United States in a more sustainable and stronger foreign policy position than when he entered office, with his successor inheriting a broader spectrum of potential policy options in a rapidly changing world.

The argument that President Obama's foreign policy record may be the most transformative in decades runs counter to much of the current conventional wisdom regarding his foreign policy, which is frequently viewed as being marred by indecisiveness and a lack of leadership. Obama's focus on domestic priorities, delegation of key foreign policy projects to his trusted secretaries, professorial approach to foreign policy decision-making, and unwillingness to use the kind of aggressive and simplistic language favoured by portions of the US and especially Washington D.C., have contributed to this perception.

Moreover, general political polarization in the United States, unrealistic expectations and decreasing poll figures ensure that his successes are minimized or even denied. Meanwhile, purported failures are usually, in effect, simply differences in policy, rather than outright failures. However, critics ignore the reality that the two Obama administrations have stayed within the broad range and remit of what has been expected of US presidents for the past seventy years: ensure core US interests are protected, while avoiding direct and unthinking involvement in every regional crisis or event. While it is tempting to peruse the daily comments, criticism and poll figures when analyzing President Obama's foreign policy performance, it is more instructive to focus primarily on his ability to conceive of, and seek to follow through on, broadly strategic issues, while also avoiding catastrophic decisions such as his predecessor's resolve to invade Iraq in 2003.

As a candidate, Barack Obama listed five goals that would guide his foreign policy: (1) ending the war in Iraq; (2) emphasizing the fight against al-Qaeda and

the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan; (3) reducing the number of nuclear weapons in the world and securing them from terrorists; (4) achieving energy security for the United States, including efforts to combat climate change; and (5) rebuilding alliances and engaging with the rest of the world (including 'enemies') to meet the challenges of the 21st century. During the first six and a half years of his presidency, Obama has secured successes and suffered setbacks in all five.

### **Ending the war in Iraq**

Clearly, President Obama ended the war in Iraq, if one allows for the translation of intent that what Obama really meant was ending US military engagement in Iraq. However, especially in the United States, President Obama has been chastized for allegedly withdrawing from Iraq too soon, thereby leading to the ISIL-driven chaos in Iraq. This common line of criticism fails to consider the sequence of events: the last US troops withdrew from Iraq in December 2011 because of a mutually agreed-upon process whose preconditions had been set by President George W. Bush during the last days of his presidency, through the signing of a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The fact that President Obama felt compelled to reintroduce US troops into Iraq in June 2014 due to ISIL advances says more about local and Iraqi politics, and the abysmal state of the Iraqi military's capabilities than the initial decision to withdraw US military forces.

### **Focusing on al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan**

As a candidate, Obama promised to increase resources and strengthen US efforts in Afghanistan. As a president, he followed through. However, even he was undoubtedly surprised at the level of increases the military deemed necessary and that he would come to approve. While a notable increase in the number of troops sent to fight in Afghanistan and the use of drones to strike in Pakistan are often remembered as components of Obama's approach, in the popular consciousness Obama fulfilled his promise by giving the go-ahead for *Operation Geronimo*, the killing of Usama bin Laden in May 2011. The wisdom of ending the US-dominated but UN-sanctioned and NATO-led ISAF operation



Barack Obama gathered together with the leaders of the G7 countries in March 2014.  
Photo: Pete Souza / White House Photo

in December 2014 will be debated for some time. Frequently forgotten is that it was Afghan president Hamid Karzai who effectively demanded the withdrawal which, starting in 2012, was conducted through a process of handovers of responsibility for security, from international to local security forces. The withdrawal of forces is, however, relative, as indicated by President Obama's recent decision to keep more than five thousand US soldiers in Afghanistan into 2017.

Unless Afghanistan and Pakistan descend into the level of chaos currently witnessed in Syria and Libya, it is likely that the killing of bin Laden will ensure that many observers will give Obama credit for doing what he promised he would in this second foreign policy area of focus. Although separate, a goal related to US military activity in Afghanistan, namely the status of the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, continues to vex the administration. President Obama's personal view that it needs to be closed is clear, but a range of pragmatic and political reasons have prevented this.

### **Reducing the number of nuclear weapons and securing them from terrorists**

Having set himself the goal of reducing the number of nuclear weapons and, implicitly, of preventing their spread, it is clear that President Obama has had a chequered track record during the first six years of his presidency. On the positive side, the New START deal signed with Russia in 2010 was one more (albeit too small) step in the direction of a distant goal supported by the President: Global Zero (no nuclear

weapons). Although the treaty has in practice enabled Russia to increase the number of active nuclear delivery vehicles, perhaps the most important recent benefit of the treaty is the eighteen annual inspections of US and Russian nuclear sites – a welcome trust-building element in a relationship which is currently tenuous than at any time since the Cold War.

The deal agreed to between Iran and the P5+1 group (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) to severely limit Iran's nuclear programme, if implemented, will be a significant achievement. Criticism of the deal by regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Israel must be taken with a pinch of salt, as their domestic political situations demand opposing virtually any deals that might strengthen Iran's regional power.

On the negative side of the ledger, to garner enough support in Congress for approval of New START, the Obama administration agreed to fund the modernization of US nuclear weapons. Had President Obama wanted to use political capital to further reduce American nuclear stockpiles, he could have done more during the past six years. For example, he could have heeded the advice of his former Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General James Cartwright, who proposed slashing the number of nuclear weapons from the current approximately 1550 warheads to less than 900, with only half being operational and even those requiring 24–72 hours to activate.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more, see [http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz\\_us\\_nuclear\\_policy\\_commission\\_report.pdf](http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf)

## **Achieving energy security (and combatting climate change)**

Candidate Obama spoke about the need to achieve energy security, relegating the need to combat climate change to the background for domestic political reasons; however, any progress or regression on that front must also be evaluated as Obama has made it clear that he sees the two challenges as being interrelated.

Regarding energy security, while not of his own doing, President Obama has benefitted from the shale gas/oil revolution, made possible by technological developments and, until recently, the relatively high price of oil. While the current lower price of oil may limit shale-energy growth in the United States during the next few years, it is still likely that the United States will become a gas net-exporter, while oil independence at a North American level is within sight.

The combination of supporting energy efficiency and renewables-based energy production through tax, policy and regulatory efforts has put the United States on a different path regarding energy security and combatting climate change from the one followed by President Obama's predecessors. Again, the President should not get all the credit for this, but his efforts to ensure real reductions in petroleum and coal use have nudged the political sphere in a more environmentally-friendly direction.

These efforts have included mandating considerably higher fuel economy standards for cars and trucks and, in August 2015, using the Environmental Protection Agency's regulatory power to force existing power plants to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, potentially causing the closure of many coal plants in the coming years. The announced regulations with the aim of cutting emissions by thirty-two per cent from 2005 to 2030 have also been welcomed globally, and will be a key puzzle piece if the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference (COP 21) to be held in Paris at the end of 2015 is to succeed.

Another action related to combatting climate change that is directly attributable to the Obama administration is the bilateral US-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change and Clean Energy Cooperation, an effort with concrete targets and which some have argued was a necessary precursor

for successful multilateral negotiation efforts, and the first time China made binding commitments in the field.

Political polarization in general, and distinct differences in the understanding of science among some Members of the US Congress, have limited President Obama's ability to do as much as he aspired to do regarding climate change. However, it is clear that the regulations-based piecemeal approach he has adopted domestically and active championing of the issue internationally have borne fruit. Obama should not get the credit for solving the problems, but does deserve appreciation for putting the United States on a path more compatible with combatting climate change and reshaping the country's energy future.

## **Rebuilding alliances and engaging with the rest of the world**

The fifth priority that candidate Obama listed was to rebuild alliances and engage with the rest of the world; by inference from other campaign speeches and talks, this also included engagement with Iran and Cuba, among others.

As president, Obama has sought to strengthen certain alliances, rebuild others and reimagine some. To the chagrin of many, he has also tried to engage with the rest of the world. To grasp the significance of various individual rebuilding or engagement efforts, it is necessary to place them in a wider geographic or thematic context, enabling the opening up of a broader perspective rather than only focusing on the outcomes of individual policies.

Geographically, President Obama has sought to rebalance American efforts around the globe. To date, the signature efforts on this front include a global rebalance (née Pivot to Asia), reassuring relevant regional allies of American support in Europe and Asia, simultaneously negotiating two large trade agreements (TTIP and TPP), normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba, and the Iran nuclear deal.

### **Rebalance (née Pivot to Asia)**

A cornerstone of Obama's foreign policy efforts was initially labelled the "Pivot to Asia", but was quickly

relaunched as the “Global Rebalance”. The increased engagement in Asia has focused on a broad range of bilateral and multilateral economic, trade, and diplomatic initiatives, including security and defence cooperation. While the idea was broadly welcomed, the implementation has been criticized in some countries for not being robust or regionally noticeable enough. This is due in part to the approach chosen by the Obama administration, focusing on bilateral efforts where steps to increase cooperation are tailored to each individual national relationship, rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

As it seeks to build a more robust bilateral relationship with China, the Obama administration has been keen to emphasize that the rebalance is not aimed at China, although its military components are clearly intended as a hedge in the face of an uncertain future. Perhaps the key ‘insight’ of the Obama administration is the need for subtlety in building the complex relationship, ensuring some key principles are respected (such as maritime freedom), while engaging in both cooperation (climate) and rivalry (cyber operations)

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is seen by many as the economic cornerstone of the rebalance to Asia, despite not including China. The successful conclusion of the negotiations and the emphasis placed on them by the administration over advancing the broadly analogous US-EU Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) seems to confirm this. The fact that the approach to the two negotiations has also been different, with TPP conducted under great secrecy and TTIP with far greater transparency, reflects the pragmatism favoured by President Obama, as well as the desire to achieve concrete political goals while being flexible as to the means by which they are achieved.

## Europe

President Obama’s detractors and supporters alike have been concerned that he would focus less on Europe than previous US presidents. During his first administration, this seems to have been particularly true; even during the 2012 re-election campaign Obama and his campaign failed to acknowledge the increasing tensions in Europe caused by Russia’s more bellicose behaviour. Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, however, ensured a considerable

increase in engagement on Obama’s part towards Europe. This includes the military measures described below and leading the initial wave of sanctions aimed at Russia, when the European Union was unable to agree on whether strong sanctions were called for.

In Europe, perhaps no relationship has changed more dramatically during Obama’s presidency than the one between the United States and Russia. The concept of a ‘reset’ that would enable cooperation with Russia on a range of issues, despite the war in Georgia, was lauded by many as an example of Obama’s pragmatism. Seeking cooperation regarding Afghanistan, Iran’s nuclear programme and a ballistic missile defence in Europe, as well as negotiating a follow-up to the START agreement were all seen as worthy goals.

Yet the implementation and success of the reset were already severely questioned prior to Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Although criticism that the US ignored European security prior to the spring of 2014 is deeply unfair, the sudden shift in the attitude of the Obama administration underlines the fact that due to NATO Alliance commitments, any US president would have to (re-)engage with Europe as a geographic region if the security situation became less stable and more threatening.

In the realm of security, NATO forms the foundation for cooperation between the United States and Europe. Following Russia’s attack on Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea, the United States quickly reacted on a bilateral and NATO basis, sending what were effectively trip-wire forces into Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland. It then initiated its European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), which aimed to allocate a billion dollars over the course of a year to increase training, exercises and the preparedness of US and other NATO member-state armed forces to conduct collective defence operations.

These initial efforts are being augmented by a frequent rotation of forces, a concept suited to the global rebalance with its lighter physical permanent military footprint. In Europe, the European Rotational Force (ERF) was active prior to Russia’s attack on Ukraine, but its size, frequency of deployment and the significant increases in repositioned material in Europe are based on decisions made by the Obama administration.

Within the realm of trade and economics, President Obama has underlined his desire to see the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership become a reality. While reassuring NATO allies in the light of increasing Russian aggression is something that any US president would have done, the push for a transatlantic economic pact chimes well with Obama's broader thematic and global geographic efforts. From Obama's perspective, a successful TTIP would strengthen the transatlantic relationship, and produce a large trading block to influence future global trading and investment standards.

As a whole, President Obama's efforts in Europe have been aimed at strengthening Western cooperation, with the ultimate aim of reinforcing the existing global system that is beneficial for the US and in the interests of others by and large.

### **Africa**

In Africa, President Obama has supported projects relating to electricity infrastructure and information technology and has sought to refocus the relationship around trade. While Obama's robust action to lead an international response to counter the Ebola outbreak in Western Africa won many plaudits, he has no signature achievement comparable to his predecessor's greatest positive achievement, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS relief (PEPFAR), which has been credited with saving millions of lives in Africa and with playing a key role in changing the direction of Sub-Saharan Africa's AIDS epidemic.

### **Latin America**

Even as a candidate, it was clear that Obama wanted to change the US approach to Latin America. Here his signature action is the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba. This has removed a long-standing irritant between the US and many Central and South American countries. While it will not repair the damage inflicted by a decades-long focus on drugs and centuries of ill-advised interference in the region, it has – along with President Obama's formal statement at the seventh Summit of the Americas in March 2015 that the days of US meddling are in the past – paved the way for a better set of relationships in the future.

A concrete effort to improve the energy infrastructure in the Caribbean and an increased focus on preventive and consequence management rather than militarized counter-drug efforts round out President Obama's broader foreign policy achievements in the region. Closer to home, his admission that the United States bears part of the blame for the flourishing drug and guns-driven instability along the US-Mexico border has made it possible to foresee deeper cooperation between the two countries.

### **The Middle East**

In terms of engaging with the rest of the world and rebuilding alliances, it is the Middle East which looks to deliver the most ambiguous results. Obama's approach to Iraq is discussed above, but omits the much broader perspective of how he has approached the Middle East and its opaque complexity. Although critics charge it with being haphazard, his approach to the changing circumstances has been careful and piecemeal. He has held fast to his strategic vision of a reduced US role in the region, and has generally succeeded through action and inaction to force regional leaders and actors to take more responsibility for their future – much to the chagrin of many of those same leaders. This has also opened the door for other actors, such as Russia, to enter the fray and attempt to shift the overall balance of power and influence in the region.

However, it is also in the Middle East more than elsewhere that the perspective one adopts casts Obama's choices in a starkly different light. If the emphasis is laid on the purported stability of relationships with authoritarian leaders and a focus on daily ups and downs, the overall record is weak. If one views the current wars and the Obama administration's occasional lukewarm support for popular revolutions as a historic opportunity for leaders and people in the region to take responsibility themselves in the long run, then the record is more positive. The approach has also enabled President Obama to thus far avoid making the US the central actor in yet another war in the Middle East – something the US citizenry has made clear it has little appetite for.

The fact that the current situations in Egypt, Libya, and Syria are demoralizing and catastrophic from the hopeful perspective of the spring of 2011 is clear. Equally clear is the folly of setting red lines regarding

the use of chemical weapons and that following through in a haphazard manner has increased frustration among allies in the region. In particular, bilateral relationships with Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have worsened significantly; however, the impact of this on the US global standing is less obviously negative. Rather, many see Obama's desire to distance the US from the most extreme policies of those states as a positive sign of a more balanced approach to the region as a whole.

Throughout his efforts to rebuild old alliances, make new friends and engage with others, President Obama's second administration has been forced to account for and consider the impacts of the revelations of extensive and advanced data collection and spying efforts by the US government. While spying is expected, it is the comprehensiveness of US efforts that has placed a severe strain on important US relationships with, most notably, Brazil and Germany. These relationships are multi-faceted and are being repaired, but they are a clear reminder that American presidents regard national interests as paramount and ultimately do not afford equal considerations to US citizens and citizens of other countries; an observation which relates to massive data collection as well as targeted drone strikes.

### **Conclusion: Bending the arc of history with strategic intent – Obama's legacy?**

Considering the increasingly complex web of violent interconnectedness that has marked Obama's time in office, it is possible to say that, paraphrasing the president himself, he has already bent the arc of history. More significantly, he has done so with conscious strategic intent. President Obama's two terms suggest that it is possible for a US president in this era of constant buffeting by those who think tactically, to set large overarching goals with global implications, and to begin addressing them successfully.

Some of President Obama's foreign policy achievements that future historians will judge as pivotal may only become visible during the remaining fifteen months of his presidency. Yet, even now, the multi-pronged approach to addressing climate change, avoiding deeply entangling the US in conflicts which do not comprise core national interests, engaging in efforts to solidify cooperative

relationships and structures, and being ready to engage in hard negotiations to achieve national goals will all be viewed as successful elements of President Obama's foreign policy legacy.

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ISBN 978-951-769-470-4  
ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen  
Cover photo: Pete Souza / White House Photo

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