

The Obama Foreign Policy Record

WASHINGTON – The almost universally accepted narrative dished out daily by the serious, high brow U.S. media is that come January 20, 2017, with Donald Trump as President, we shall have 4 years of “*Amateur Hour*” in U.S. foreign policy. This dismal prospect is of course a far cry from the thoughtful, insightful and properly balanced foreign policy agenda expertly crafted and implemented by President Barack Obama and his top-notch foreign and national security policy team.

The incompetents are taking over

We are told by savvy analysts that, all of sudden, from reliable, steady competence that –as we all should know– raised American prestige worldwide, we shall plunge into an abyss of policy mayhem stirred by dangerous ignorance mixed with laughable (or dangerous) braggadocio, with a stupendously unqualified Commander in Chief at the helm.

Condescension

This narrative is another expression of the Olympian condescension of the perennially entitled leaders of the Washington foreign affairs establishment. They simply cannot get used to the reality of a complete outsider, with no real hands-on experience in this field until now reserved to few insiders, now in charge.

Trump is inexperienced

True, Trump is inexperienced. He may indeed fail in foreign policy, and we should not take this prospect lightly, as there are bound to be consequences. On the other hand, he may not fail, after all. Trump will have a team working for him. Most of the people he picked thus far have considerable

international and national security experience.

Right mix?

That said, has he chosen the right mix of people? Even more important, when confronted with difficult decisions, in murky situations when there is no obvious right policy choice, will Trump have the right instincts? Will he manage to safeguard –better yet, advance– the American National Interest? Quite frankly, we do not know yet. Time will tell.

Obama's record

However, while we can only speculate about the future, we do know a great deal about the Obama Team foreign policy record. And, no, it is not stellar. Contrary to the official narrative, the supposedly expert hands that have been in charge until now are not shining stars. And Obama is no great leader when it comes to directing U.S. foreign affairs. Hesitation, mixed messages and retreat have defined American foreign policy under his stewardship.

Now, after George W. Bush's profoundly ill-advised pro-democracy enthusiasm which led America into two horrendously costly and mostly unsuccessful wars –Afghanistan and then Iraq– a new foreign policy guided by restraint was indeed a welcome change after the 2008 elections. But there is a huge distinction between careful, calculated withdrawal behind defensible lines, while spelling out U.S. continuing strategic priorities, and policy confusion leading to retreat.

Allowing chaos in Iraq

In Iraq, President Barack Obama used Baghdad's intransigence regarding the legal status of U.S. troops which would stay on after December 2011 as a good excuse for ending the negotiation with then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. With no deal with Baghdad in place, the U.S. pulled completely out of Iraq at the end of 2011.

At that time Iraq was a relatively stable but still fragile and politically split country (Sunni in the North, Shia in the South) in which America had invested an enormous amount of resources. Pulling out completely while the wounds had not healed was an ill-advised and in the end horribly wrong decision.

To this day, President Obama claims he had no choice, given the uncooperative stance of the Baghdad government. But this is nonsense. If the Obama administration really wanted a deal with Prime Minister al-Maliki that would have allowed a substantial U.S. military presence after 2011 it would have found a way to get one.

Get out

The fact is that Obama wanted out of Iraq, entirely for domestic political reasons. He wanted out of Iraq in order to show to the American people that he had made good on a major campaign promise: he had brought all the troops home. And, in fact, later on he repeatedly bragged about this “accomplishment” represented by the closing of the Iraq War chapter. Which is to say that concerns about Obama’s popularity at home caused America to essentially abandon a country in which it had invested years, hundreds of billions, and so many lives of killed U.S. soldiers.

Could sizable American troops stationed in Iraq have prevented the steady descent into chaos that followed their departure? We do not know for sure. But it is not far-fetched to believe that they could have helped keep things together.

Belated U-turn in 2014

That said, Obama was forced to make a complete U-Turn on Iraq when this deeply divided country was confronted with an invasion masterminded in 2014 by the Islamic State, or ISIL from its bases in Eastern Syria. A massive invasion, by the way, that the sophisticated Obama intelligence leaders never

saw coming.

With no U.S. troops on the ground, (thanks to Obama's complete troops withdrawal decided back in December 2011), ISIL breezed, mostly unopposed, into Northern Iraq. In a matter of days it took over Mosul –the second largest city in the country– and the entire North West of Iraq. An eyewitness quoted by *The Guardian* said that:

“The city [Mosul] fell like a plane without an engine. They [ISIL] were firing their weapons into the air, but no one was shooting at them.”

Beyond taking over Mosul, ISIL captured vast amounts of cash and a huge arsenal of U.S. supplied weapons and material, simply because the Iraqi troops had run away.

So, here is the upshot regarding Obama's record on Iraq: U.S. troops out; ISIL in. The Caliphate takes over 1/3 of the country within days. America forced to move back in. But slowly and with hesitation. Meanwhile, militias funded by Iran spread through the country. This is complete policy failure.

Surge in Afghanistan?

In Afghanistan, President Obama started with an almost comical public debate in the Fall of 2009 (first year of his mandate) about what U.S. policy should be regarding the continuing Taliban insurgency. Obama finally ended the deliberations in November 2009 with a commitment to a “Iraq-like” surge in Afghanistan. But it was a surge accompanied by a publicly announced withdrawal timetable.

Yes it was just like that. Washington would send additional troops aimed at stabilizing this perennially chaotic country; but only for a short while. How ill-advised. You go to war not to shoot around a little bit, and then go home. You go to war to win. Or you do not go at all. Result? 2016 is over and the war in Afghanistan is still going on. This is another failure

due to Washington's indecisiveness and half measures.

Get rid of Ghaddafi

Then there was Libya, and the ill-conceived idea of toppling dictator Ghaddafi, without even a thought of a game plan about what to do afterwards. Result? Ghaddafi was toppled and he is certainly dead. But so is Libya, now a failed state torn apart by various warring militias. This is failure number three.

Hesitation about Syria

And what about Syria? in 2011, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, President Obama declared that President Assad heavy-handed repression of initially peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations was intolerable. Assad, Obama declared, "had to go".

Strong words. However, this clear statement of a U.S. policy objective –nothing but regime change would do for Syria–lacked even the semblance of a policy aimed at obtaining the outcome: make Assad go.

This incoherence between grandiose objectives and no policy to implement them was only the beginning of a half-hearted U.S. policy in support of some factions within the Syrian opposition.

Military planners should know that a little bit of support is not enough. In war, either you are in or you are out. Even if your method is to support the opposition, as opposed to sending your own troops, you have to be with them all the way. Support to your side in the conflict has to be decisive. The objective must be victory.

Media criticism

Well, even the serious usually pro-Obama media, after years of U.S. half measures, recognized that Syria is a huge policy failure for Obama. this is a BBC analysis dated October 2015:

“[Regarding Syria] the philosophical discussion at the White House was heated and fierce, leading to stalemate, not resolution.

For years Obama and his deputies refused to say categorically: we’re not doing this. Instead a decision was postponed.

Four years later, the result is a splintered Syrian opposition, the growth of the Islamic State group and a humanitarian disaster stretching across Europe.

Last year, in a move that was more symbolic than serious, Obama asked Congress for money to fund a programme allowing US personnel to teach rebels marksmanship, navigation and other skills.

The goal was to train about 15,000 rebels in Jordan and other countries so they could return to Syria and fight. However, US defence officials admitted last month [September 2015] that only four or five of the recruits in the programme had actually returned to the battle.”

It ended badly

And this was the BBC, a fairly sympathetic voice. A year later, things got only worse. The result of years of U.S. policy confusion and half measures is a semi-destroyed Syria, Russian massive intervention in support of Assad, the Iranians and Hezbollah firmly planted there, a defeated opposition just driven out of Aleppo, not to mention untold numbers of dead people and millions of refugees. And now, a new ceasefire was arranged by Russia in partnership with Turkey and Iran. The U.S. is not even at the table. Talk about American retreat. This is a colossal policy failure.

ISIL in Iraq

And then there is ISIL in Iraq, the worst consequence of the U.S. total military withdrawal from the country it had invaded

back in March of 2003. In a speech to the Nation, on September 10, 2014, President Obama sounded really tough about ISIL and the threat that it represented for the region and indeed the world.

He declared that: *“Our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy”*.

It sounded that America really meant business. To begin with, Obama told the world that Washington had assembled a powerful coalition of 66 countries. Impressive? Not so much. If you care to dig just a little bit, you discover that this unbeatable anti-ISIL Armada includes heavyweights like Luxembourg, Somalia, Iceland, Bosnia, Bahrain, Romania, Cyprus, Estonia, Panama, Montenegro, Latvia and Albania. Are you still impressed?

Painfully slow progress

And the American military effort has also been modest. Two years later, while there have been significant successes against ISIL, we are still not done. Coalition supported Iraqi forces, (by the way this would also include support from Iran) are getting closer to Mosul; but they are still far from retaking it and eventually driving ISIL out of Iraq, let alone “destroying” it, as Obama pledged.

This is almost inconceivable. ISIL is a bunch of nasty thugs who use barbaric methods. But ISIL is not the German Wehrmacht smashing France, or the Japanese Imperial Army conquering Manchuria or the Philippines. It is a rag-tag, third-rate military force. It is unbelievable that America, with the largest and most technologically advanced military force in the world, could not destroy the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate in a matter of weeks.

To the contrary, a recent *Washington Post* story indicated that this battle against ISIL is going to be long slug:

“.[...]But a full offensive to retake the city [of Raqqa, de facto capital of ISIL] could still be months or more away, despite hopes in Washington that an operation to take the Islamic State’s most symbolically significant stronghold would be well underway before President Obama left office.”

This slow and uneven progress is the military outcome of policy confusion and partial military engagement. Despite Obama’s clear commitment a couple of year ago, the mighty U.S. still has not managed to “*degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL*”.

Pivot to Asia?

And there are many more examples of grand plans that yielded little. Consider the pivot to Asia. Nice idea; but little to show in terms of results. Suffice to say that China, just as America publicly committed to shift its policy focus on Asia, has managed to increase its sphere of influence throughout most of the South China Sea –essentially unchallenged.

True, the Obama administration made all the right noises when confronted with the evidence that China is busy building up and militarizing small islands scattered across the South China Sea that it occupied with the bogus justification that these rocks (some of which do not even qualify as “land” according to international law) have always been under Chinese sovereignty.

The Obama administration has not been able to challenge this creeping Chinese expansion, nor has it been capable or willing to persuade the Chinese to retreat and get out.

Iran

I am purposely leaving out of this analysis the Iran nuclear deal, because it is a lot more complicated than these other issues, and because in Iran’s case the Obama administration acted with purpose towards a fairly clear policy objective:

freeze the Iranian nuclear program. And this objective has been reached. While there are many vocal critics of the deal, none of them seem to have a better plan. Just getting out of a "bad deal" without having anything to replace it will not yield better outcomes.

Obama's retreat

Anyway, you get the picture. Clearly, it is always easy to point out foreign policy failures with the benefit of hindsight. Of course, it would be completely unfair to blame Obama for an Arab World in chaos, and other major troubles.

Still, the net result of Obama's 8 years in office is not stellar.

All in all, U.S. policies regarding Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and ISIL reveal a pattern of hesitation, in fact genuine confusion, and the inability to define, articulate and pursue what in Obama's mind is the U.S. national interest.

What U.S. retreat signals to the world

It would be disingenuous to conclude that all these failures, mixed messages and retreats from the world stage do not matter, because America after all is still the most powerful country on earth.

It is obvious that other political leaders around the world look at both American military capabilities and American political will. If they conclude that America lost its will, its powerful military forces will not deter as much as they used to.

Will Trump be better?

In the end, it is perfectly alright to express doubts about President-elect Trump ability to articulate a mature U.S. foreign policy. Still, the idea that come January 20 2017 the rowdy, clueless children are taking over, while the thoughtful

grown ups have been driven out of the room is nonsense.

Quite frankly, if the poor Obama foreign policy record is the best the mature and experienced adults are capable of, then we may as well give the untested Trump and his team a chance.

Who knows, they may surprise us.