

US FOREIGN POLICY UNDER OBAMA: THE SHADOW OF INTERVENTIONISM?

Remarks to L' Institut De Preparations De L' Administration Generale (IPAG)

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...when ills are recognized in advance, they are quickly cured, but when...they are allowed to increase until everyone may recognize them, then remedy is no longer possible. (Niccolo Machiavelli).

I want to thank IPAG for welcoming me today to talk about US foreign policy in the aftermath of our recent presidential elections. First, allow me to take a closer look at the elections as it forms the domestic political backdrop to the making of US foreign policy. Then I will analyze President Barack Obama's foreign policy, which I will characterize as comparatively passive, and show how such a weak global posture could actually ignite crises that force the President to reassert US global leadership.

The Polarization of the American Electorate

Democracy in America remains vibrant. The scale of this month's voting was not only remarkable in the number of people waiting in long lines to cast their ballots. Also phenomenal was the high participation rates in the months leading up to election day. Tens of thousands of campaign volunteers knocked on millions of doors, telephoned millions of prospective voters and ensured "their" voters voted. Nearly every eligible voter – about 220 million - was reached one way or another by a national, statewide or local political campaign.

That is the good news. The bad news is that American politics has become very polarized along racial, ethnic and socio-economic lines. President Obama's voting base saw over 90 percent support from the African American community. Over two-thirds of Hispanics and single women voted for him with similar one-sided backing from urban elites, public sector workers and young voters.

In contrast, the Republican Party base saw strong support from men, whites, married women, older voters, evangelical Christians and the business community. Traditionally, such socio-economic cleavages are normal in US politics, but what is striking this time is the low percentage of crossover voting between these constituencies. Socially divisive issues, such as gay marriage and health care mandates forcing Catholic institutions and business owners to pay for abortion and birth control, have further personalized the left-right political divide. In many ways, the high level of political participation, a good thing, has led to a higher level of political discord, a bad thing. Such domestic polarization is certain to negatively impact the course of US defense and foreign policy making.

And the political divide has become structural. While the Democratic Party kept control of the White House and 100-member US Senate, President Obama's re-election did not undo Republican Party control over the US House of Representatives which holds the power of the purse. From the right's perspective this confirms the electorate's rejection of Obama's expansive government agenda. Exit polling on election day seems bear this out as only 41% of respondents said they support President Obama's health insurance reform program and by 48% to 43% want less government. Over the past 14 years, the

number of Congressional “swing districts” throughout the country – districts that swing from one party to another at election time – dropped from 164 to 99 (of 435 seats), exposing a deep ideological fissure between the two parties and reducing incentives for political compromise. Republicans also continue to do well at the state level holding majorities of Governorships and state legislatures, an important political reality in our federal form of government where power is shared.

In sum, on the evening of November 6, America found itself essentially in the same politically fractured situation as on November 5.

National Elections and Foreign Policy

So what are the consequences of our elections on US foreign policy? First, expect future foreign policy debates in the US to be as sharp as our domestic political ones. More immediately, our unsustainable public deficits make defense and foreign aid vulnerable targets for budget cutters with negative consequences for our capability to project military and political power overseas. Nevertheless, the trend towards US global retrenchment had already begun during the Administration’s first term which deliberately sought to scale back many of President George Bush’s policies. No matter how the US resolves our debt crisis, in the short run, it will only continue or even accelerate the trend, not reverse it.

But let us take a step back and look at Obama’s global retrenchment within historical perspective. The US has always treated its superpower status with ambivalence, swinging between internationalism and isolationism. We have witnessed such neo-isolationist tendencies before, during the 1970s after the national trauma of the Vietnam War and following the collapse of the Soviet Union only to see world events provoke a US global resurgence; first with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1989 and second with the terrorist attack on the US on September 11, 2001. Given popular exhaustion with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan it is not surprising we would again reduce our global footprint, no matter which political party won the White House. But one cannot fail to note President Obama’s genuine personal discomfort with wielding US power abroad, especially military power.

The Administration’s 2013 defense budget, for example, makes \$500 billion in defense cuts over ten years to a percentage of GDP (4%) below that of the post-Cold War period of the early 1990s. This is \$700 billion less than what his own Secretary of Defense requested. Over five years the US Army will also cut troop levels by 80,000 and Marines by 18,000. The Air Force has retired 700 more planes than it has purchased and for this fiscal year is set to buy 54 new planes but will retire another 300. In Europe, US forces have declined from a peak of 300,000 during the Cold War to 30,000 today with more reductions expected. The President’s military doctrine for the first time ends the baseline of sizing our military capabilities to conduct two wars simultaneously.

On foreign policy, the pullback is substantial, reflecting the President’s personal disposition as much as budget constraints. To the dismay of our allies, one of Obama’s early foreign policy goals was to improve relations with Russia by unilaterally abandoning a missile defense program in Eastern Europe, designed to protect against Iranian rockets but with proximity to Russia irritated Moscow. In Iraq, he withdrew all US troops despite advantages such strategic presence conferred to a region beset by violence and

instability, cross-sectarian Iraqi support for a continued US military presence and as Iraq became a major commercial market for US industry. He may decide to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan though the consensus is that Kabul is not ready to defend itself against a resurgent Taliban and it could further destabilize a nuclear-armed Pakistan. In Libya, where the US was pressed by France and Great Britain to join the multilateral military action to oust Muammar Qaddafi, little security assistance has since been forthcoming, resulting in the effective loss of central government control over most of the country.

This White House has de-emphasized democracy promotion, something that has always enjoyed bipartisan support that considered democratization and national security as correlated pillars of American grand strategy. President Obama cut democracy funding to Egypt in half prior to the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime and his Administration shows little stomach to challenge the new Muslim Brotherhood led government's crackdown on media and efforts to impose Sharia law. He stayed silent during the mullahs' violent crackdown on Iran's short-lived Green Revolution. In Bahrain, the White House is mute on failed promises by the Sunni regime to ease repression of its Shia majority. Russia's suppression of its political opposition and civil society and the Ukraine's slide back into authoritarianism elicit few alarms. Its lack of action, political or military, to stem the carnage consuming Syria reminds us of world inaction in the face of the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides.

Yet, despite the substantial resources expended over the years to finance our global activities and current debt problems, a national survey conducted last year found that over 92% of Americans believe it is important for the US to continue to play a *significant* role in world affairs while 85% consider the US "a force for good in the world." So there is a clear perception gap between President Obama's limited and the US public's more expansive view about America's place in world affairs.

What are the results of this Administration's passive approach to foreign policy? In my opinion, it has encouraged across-the-board belligerency. This year Russia expelled the US Agency for International Development while Moscow repeatedly blocks all international efforts to tackle the Syrian crisis and interferes in the internal affairs of its neighbors, such as Georgia. Earlier this month, Iranian fighter jets tried to shoot down a US drone flying over international waters while the regime doggedly pursues a nuclear bomb capability, dispatches forces to Syria and arms Hamas with rockets used to hit Israel from Gaza. For months, Pakistan, happy to accept billions in US aid, blocked critical transportation lines supporting US military forces operating in Afghanistan, while it continues to give sanctuary to Taliban forces launching attacks on Afghanistan. In a gratuitous insult, Egyptian police refused to protect the US Embassy from mob attack. And while Osama bin Laden is dead, al Qaeda groups surge again as demonstrated by the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi, killing four of our diplomats.

Yet I maintain that President Obama cannot alone dictate the extent of US global disengagement. It is not his unilateral decision to make. Political vacuums are filled one way or another and if the US will not fill them, someone else will, usually to everyone's detriment. Let us not forget that George Bush was initially a hard nosed realist who vigorously campaigned in 2000 against nation-building and foreign aid, criticizing his predecessor's multiple interventions in the Balkans, only to emerge as one of America's strongest advocates for nation-building, democracy promotion and foreign aid.

Failed States and the “Intervention Dilemma”

What would be such a catalyzing event that forced President Obama to reconsider his passive approach to US foreign policy? In my estimation, the current turmoil gripping the Islamic arc stretching from the Maghreb to the Indian subcontinent represents the most dangerous national security threat for the international community and will eventually severely test Obama’s neo-isolationist world view about America’s global security posture. Last year, the Arab Spring brought hope that the democratic wave that ended Soviet Communism might now sweep across Arab and other Islamic lands. Much of that optimism has dissipated as Libya, Yemen, Mali, Syria, Somalia, the Gaza Strip, Afghanistan and Pakistan play host to transnational terrorist groups, while Egypt, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Sudan totter on the brink of systemic state breakdown.

Preventing any of these countries from becoming launching pads for terrorist attacks, as Afghanistan did, remains the principal security objective and it presses the West to methodically consider the entire spectrum of intervention tools at its disposal – humanitarian, diplomatic, developmental, intelligence as well as military. Let me take up Syria as I believe it illustrates what I call the “intervention dilemma” faced by world leaders and their senior policy makers: how to make the very difficult threat assessment of a pending collapse of a state and make the politically risky determination if the situation demands a pre-emptive military or other form of robust intervention in the expectation that intervention is not only inevitable but will be far costlier and more difficult later on. The longer we wait, the worse it gets and the harder it is to fix. France’s bold decision today to become the first Western country to formally recognize the Syrian opposition coalition as the Syrian people’s legitimate representative, a step France took prior to militarily deposing Libya’s Qaddafi, could initiate belated international intervention of some sort.

And let us now not be distracted from the bugaboo of interventionism which today, when discussed, reflexively provokes dismissive shrugs, academic contempt or shocked guffaws as something irretrievably passé. The fact is there always is intervention in one form or another and if the US decides not to intervene it does not somehow magically dissuade other international actors from intervening, as Syria illustrates. So the issue is never one of “to intervene or not,” but of when, how and at what cost.

The West’s failure to act early in the Syrian crisis has resulted in the country’s ethnic, political and institutional collapse. So far, 36,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million have fled their homes. Even should despot Bashar Assad agree to leave Syria, the country will require massive reconstruction and security assistance to stabilize it without assurance such a costly investment will succeed. And the longer we wait to intervene, in what should be judged as the inevitability of intervention, the costlier will it be to fix. Even should we militarily intervene tomorrow, I would bet that Syria would still become the next breeding ground for global terrorism as Afghanistan did during the 1990s.

We have seen this narrative play out before. During the early 1990s, during a period of similar US global retrenchment, Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic began his path to infamy with a limited skirmish in Slovenia, the first of the Yugoslav republics to secede. Had Nato taken limited but firm military action then, we could have blunted if not avoided altogether the savagery that subsequently engulfed the

region and that required massive reconstruction aid and large numbers of UN and Nato peacekeepers. Similarly, the failure to remove Saddam Hussein in 1991 after he had militarily invaded Iran and Kuwait and threatened global oil supplies only set into motion a more intrusive intervention twelve years later and at far greater expense. A political decision to abandon Afghanistan following the Soviet military pullout in 1989 allowed the Taliban and al Qaeda to fill the power vacuum left behind by the super-powers forever changing the course of modern history. In each case, limited intervention early on could have spared the world and citizens of those regions enormous blood and treasure.

With Syria, here we are again, facing the inevitable demise of a brutal dictatorship that we already know is brutal and ready to inflict as much national and regional carnage as it can in order to stay in power. The cost of inaction will be significant, costs we all will ultimately bear. Allow me to analyze this unfolding crisis in more detail.

Infrastructure. Syrian forces on all sides are inflicting massive physical destruction to buildings and basic infrastructure such as water, sewerage and power. Every day that passes represents millions in additional future foreign aid needed to repair what is being broken. Worse, with massive refugee flows, the resultant brain drain will deprive Syria of the experts and public servants it will need to rebuild. In Iraq, the twelve year interlude between the first and second Gulf Wars saw the country's infrastructure collapse, worsened by the steady flight of its professionals and technocrats needed to rebuild. \$51 billion in US reconstruction aid would not suffice to compensate for those lost years. The obliteration of Afghanistan's physical, social and institutional infrastructure has rendered ineffective billions of dollars in foreign aid sent since 2001.

Militarization. Syria's civilian opposition has given way to militias, fueled by regional players arming "their" respective militias and thus releasing the genie of extremist groups, criminal syndicates and elements of the regime's security forces which are set to change their Marxist-secular garb for Sunni fundamentalist ones. Given the utter destruction of Syria's administrative infrastructure, these violent elements, as they have in other failed states, will lock themselves into the country's future social structures ever poised to undercut efforts at political and sectarian reconciliation – as they benefit from instability – and imbue the country with a lasting culture of debilitating political violence. Peaceful transition in Tunisia, in contrast, has led to moderates winning elections and the state appears stable, as they did in Eastern and Central Europe, apart from the former Yugoslavia. In Libya though, where regime violence was only partially blunted by delayed and limited foreign military intervention, the inevitable rise of militias acts as a serious impediment to post-conflict transition. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia and Somalia, the emergence of militias became the core obstacle to stable transition. As societies implode the men of letters must give way to the men of guns and men of guns are unlikely to give up power peacefully.

Sectarianism. The massacres and large scale bombing of civilian populations are a calculated effort by the Assad regime to irreversibly compromise his core constituencies by making them complicit in his war crimes. But by doing so the regime's divide and conquer strategy ensures future sectarian-based conflict for years if not decades to come. Syria is a unique and delicate mosaic of diverse faiths and ethnicities. Its Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Alawites, and various Christian denominations ought to serve as sources of

binding national pride. Leave it to despots to exploit sectarian differences to cement their grip on power. Saddam's wholesale slaughter of Shia Arabs and Kurds may have firmed up his Sunni Arab power base and Milosevic's ethnic cleansing campaign against non-Serbs cleared out a larger territory for a future Greater Serbian state, but both left behind deeply fractured societies that continue to impair these countries' efforts at sectarian reconciliation. The severing of communal bonds, the foundational building blocs of political stability, becomes the greatest obstacle to peaceful post-conflict transition.

Regional Blowback. The Syrian crisis is increasingly spilling over its borders to negatively impact regional stability from a spike in terrorist attacks in Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan to border skirmishes with Turkey, a member of Nato, and Israel. Various foreign terrorist organizations are fighting there and strengthening their operational capabilities while using the conflict to recruit new members. The large refugee flows into Lebanon threaten to upset the delicate sectarian balance there much in the way the flight of Palestinian refugees over thirty years ago led to the country's disastrous civil war. Allowing Afghanistan to implode during the 1990s led to it becoming a crucible for various terrorist groups that today threaten the stability of Pakistan, other Muslim countries and the world at large. It is not improbable that Syria will become the next major terrorist haven.

Hence, President Obama's anti-interventionist disposition may, in the longer run, eventually cost us far more politically, militarily and financially than if he had acted more robustly in Libya, Syria, Iraq and during the onset of the Arab Spring and Green Revolution. The regional and global consequences of blowback will only multiply these costs. Pentagon planners may be prematurely discounting large scale US military interventions as a historical footnote – but history painfully teaches us otherwise.

The US-European Alliance

No doubt, US-European relations can no longer count as much on the binding presence of US military forces on European soil. But fears of a lessening US-European relationship in favor of an Asia-centric US foreign policy, I believe, are exaggerated. Trade between the two continents is half of global Gross Domestic Product and Nato remains America's only effective politico-security architecture with no serious alternatives. Cultural, political, economic and other natural affinities bind the two continents and these alone can preserve the trans-Atlantic alliance for decades to come. Asia cannot remotely match this organic relationship.

Amid the immediate threats arising from the Islamic world, US-European cooperation will invariably serve as the anchor to any global response to these challenges. Europe still commands substantial economic and political leverage in terms of trade, aid, private investment, immigration, security and other forms of multilateral cooperation. Europe will play a central role in any post-war scenario in Syria. Let us not forget the billions of Euros in aid and security support EU countries invested in Iraq and Afghanistan. Though the US provided the bulk of logistical support and weapons in the military action against Qaddafi, it was a genuine multi-lateral effort. France and Great Britain retain a truly global perspective among EU countries and betray little popular angst with military engagements *per se*. Witness France's bold decision today to formally recognize Syria's opposition. However, allow me to add a caveat: should Europe continue to cut its defense spending to the extent it can no longer project

military power abroad, it must be prepared to concede its political influence over how the US wields its own military power. But none of this will matter absent the superpower role of the United States, the only country that can mobilize the threshold amount of political, financial and military wherewithal to coordinate and lead a global intervention of sufficient magnitude.

And a brief word about China. Many pundits point to China as the next global power set to displace an America in decline. That too is over stated. In fact, China is poised to remain a strong regional power, still dwarfed by the US economy and military, principally a source of cheap labor rather than a source of innovation that could underpin true superpower status, distrusted by its neighbors, home to a political system rife with corruption, severe demographic and inter-ethnic and regional tensions, lacking cultural affinity with other countries and no indication it can muster the kind of political flexibility needed to manage domestic political crises.

In the long run, the world is what is always was, is and always will be. And I predict that as with previous isolationist leaning Administrations, world events will make an interventionist of President Obama. And given that the issue of US superpower status is not one of resources and objective strength or even about a serious challenger emerging over the horizon, but strictly one of political will, the world ought to be prepared for the eventuality of another round of American global resurgence.

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