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## Obama versus Obama's foreign policy

Benjamin H. Friedman

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I wish the Barack Obama Jeffrey Goldberg interviewed for the Atlantic's April cover story had been in charge of U.S. foreign policy for the last seven years. Obama's arguments in the article are similar to those Cato's foreign policy department are always employing in criticizing the Obama administration.

One such argument says that U.S. military leadership promotes free-riding among allies. Another is that overthrowing Middle-Eastern dictators by arming their rebel opponents tends to promote chaos destructive to human life and liberal values and that letting in more refugees from those conflicts is a better way to promote humanitarian ends. In the interview, Obama agrees that U.S. entanglement in the Middle's East's civil wars drains U.S. power and security. He sensibly applies the same logic to Russia — dismissing the idea that Russia's meddling in the Syrian civil war strengthens it. He too is critical of Russian aggression beyond its borders but suggests that Putin is propping up friendly neighbors rather than launching an expansionist frenzy. He agrees that Russia is far weaker than the United States but also that, given our relatively limited interest in states like Ukraine on Russia's borders, there is little sense in trying to bolster those states with aid or bluffs so that they can overcome Russian aggression.

Goldberg's Obama is especially impressive in arguing that it is stupid to make war in the name of signaling or credibility. He rightly rejects the idea that foreign leaders start wars because Washington failed to fight in very different circumstances. He even "disdains" Washington's foreign policy establishment for its credibility "fetish" and reflexive hawkishness.

Unfortunately the actual President Obama has sometimes taken the other side of these arguments. In Syria, he is working to overthrow a second Middle-Eastern dictator by aiding a rebellion. He kept U.S. forces in Iraq and appointed two secretaries of defense that supported the prolonged occupation there. He initially supported NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine and subsequently backed military aid for the latter, which undermines its willingness to accommodate Russia. He offered NATO's credibility as one reason to increase troop levels in

Afghanistan. He initially gave a credibility rationale for bombing the Assad regime to punish it for using chemical weapons, as Goldberg notes. Obama used credibility to argue for bombing on behalf of Libya's rebels — not intervening, he said, would send a message to other regional dictators that they could keep power by killing their people.

What explains the difference between the policies Obama supported and the arguments he now makes? That will remain a mystery for a while, but I'll still speculate. One possible explanation is that the president is not totally consistent on these matters, and he can make a decent case for either side. His more realist side perhaps emerged in response to his interviewer's hawkish assumptions. Goldberg assumes, for example, that requesting congressional authorization for bombing Syria and then getting a deal where it gives up its chemical weapons is surrender rather than a successful threat. An interviewer pushing from the other side — asking, for example, if bombing seven countries is excessive — might have unearthed Obama more interventionist thinking.

Another possibility is that the president has learned substantially on the job. Whether or not he was a realist when he was elected, he has become one, arguably. Or maybe the president has struggled to impose his views on the foreign policy bureaucracy. As Richard Neustadt tells us, presidents have to persuade people to do their bidding because they have limited time and political capital. Obama probably exacerbated that problem through his appointments, which left him as the most dovish person in his cabinet. To be fair, the establishment's nature makes it tough to fill cabinets with other sorts of thinkers.

Probably some combination of those explanations is at work. If so, three lessons follow. One is that things could always be worse. Those of us that dislike this president's foreign policy record should consider the plausible alternatives. In politics you have to grade on a curve. Second, experience in national politics, while no guarantor of wisdom, improves presidential performance. Obama could have developed some of these insights before taking office. Third, better foreign policy takes more than better leaders. Better politics could make smarter foreign policies and better presidents.

*Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute. This column originally appeared on the Cato @ Liberty blog.*