

Muddling Through in the Middle East Is Not a Substitute for Strategy

Posted: 04/ 5/11 04:03 PM ET

Follow



[George W. Bush](#), [Middle East](#), [Congress](#), [Iraq](#), [Libya](#), [Obama](#), [Obama Middle East](#), [Vietnam](#), [Cold War](#), [Middle East Policy](#), [Obama Libya](#), [Pragmatism](#), [World News](#)

President Barack Obama's response to Libya's civil strife has been hailed as a model of foreign-policy pragmatism. Based on lucid cost-benefit analysis of U.S. interests and values and the resources available to advance them, Obama [decided](#) on a "time-limited, scope-limited military action" aimed at averting massacre of civilians in Libya.

There was something refreshing about a U.S. president insisting that the intervention in Libya wasn't the prelude to the making of a grand strategy or to the launching of a new ideological crusade. In contrast to his predecessor, Obama was not trying to remake the Middle East or even pretend that Washington could control developments there.

Instead, Obama was going to make his decisions case by case, evaluating each crisis in the Middle East on the basis of its unique local conditions and its potential to affect U.S. interests: Behind-the-scene diplomacy in Egypt or missile and air strikes in Libya. And he'll cross the policy bridge when only he'll get to the next upheaval in Syria or Jordan or Bahrain or Saudi Arabia.

Should advocates of foreign policy pragmatism be elated? After all, they have always warned decision-makers not to fall into the trap of rigid dogmas that make it difficult to identify the nuances of each international development. Hence, American presidents who had identified every left-wing nationalist leader in the Third World as "pro-Soviet" during the Cold War ended up drawing the U.S. into the Vietnam quagmire.

Similarly, by constructing a grand strategy to deal with the threat of international terrorism posed by the imaginary forces of "Islamofascism," President George W. Bush created the conditions for the Iraq fiasco.

But pragmatism in the service of a lousy foreign policy is no virtue. President Obama, who had inherited Bush's interventionist policies in the Middle East, pledged to reverse them during his election campaign. That in turn created the expectation that Obama would outline a new U.S. global strategy in the Middle East and explain to the American people not only how -- but also why -- he was planning to use America's military and economic resources around the world, starting with the Middle East.

Instead, Obama has held series of media events targeting Middle Eastern audiences while making adjustments to the Bush agenda, including increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan, without clarifying the strategic rationale for the massive U.S. military intervention in the region.

As demonstrated in the way he made his decision to increase the troop level in Afghanistan or his handling of Iraq and Israel/Palestine, Obama's foreign policy modus operandi goes beyond a failure to introduce a broad strategic vision. His celebrated "pragmatism" is based on a process of muddling through on the path of least resistance, under which pressure from powerful and competent political and bureaucratic players, and the impact of the 24/7 media environment, end up determining the final policy decision.

Incrementalism, siding with political allies and appeasing rivals, can be applied successfully in managing foreign policy. But when confronting major international crises -- like those sweeping the Middle East -- making ad hoc decisions in response to this or that pressure and without the guidance of a coherent strategy is a recipe for muddling through into disaster.

Indeed, the upheaval in the Middle East recalls the instability in the Balkans on the eve of World War I, and the way regional national, ethnic and religious rivalries can create pressure on outside powers to intervene in local conflicts and transform them into a costly conflagration. It is as though the policy process itself takes over and creates its own momentum towards an unnecessary war that no one really wanted.

That the U.S. is now being sucked into a tribal war in Libya by a president who was bulldozed into military action by a powerful axis of American and European humanitarian interventionists in the name of supporting a bunch of "rebels" who may or may not have ties to al Qaeda -- and all of that taking place without any serious debate in Congress -- is a dramatic manifestation of what could be the shape of things to come as more governments in the Middle East are being challenged by domestic opposition, civil wars that metamorphose into regional conflicts, and the Obama administration comes under pressure to "do something."

But the decision about doing or not doing something in response to this or that crisis shouldn't be determined by the views of the last person Obama talked with over the phone. Instead, if Obama fails to articulate a coherent foreign policy strategy, the American people led by Congress should start debating what the U.S. interests in the Middle East are and what it should do about them.