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## **President Barack Obama: Time for Washington to do Less Abroad**

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President Barack Obama was elected proposing to do what most every other modern presidential candidate proposes doing: more.

His international agenda involves the standard litany. The U.S. must strengthen alliances, browbeat adversaries, resolve crises, ameliorate conflicts, protect friends, negotiate agreements, deter wars, combat disease, promote prosperity, and more.

The normal result is an agenda without end--and almost as long a list of failures. Presidents leave office having suffered multiple frustrations, broken numerous promises, proposed extraordinary outlays, and caused occasional wars.

President Obama seems set to repeat the pattern, unless he learns from his predecessors. The answer is simple, though counterintuitive: do less.

Barack Obama entered office with an ambitious foreign policy. He was aided by the positive international response to his election. No one could deny that he was different from his unpopular, confrontational predecessor. For the first time in years, there was widespread optimism around the globe about an American administration.

However, the president has quickly learned the limitations facing even the world's most powerful nation. Again and again, Washington has failed to achieve its objectives. In some instances the results are delayed or the costs are inflated. In other cases success appears unlikely or well-nigh impossible.

Perhaps the administration's highest current priority is Afghanistan. Yet the military situation continues to deteriorate, with combat commanders requesting more troops. Air strikes continue to cost civilian lives and undercut popular backing for the allied cause. Attacking the expansive drug trade risks increasing support for insurgents. The Karzai government's credibility, already at low ebb due to corruption and incompetence, fell even further with the recent fraud-ridden election. President Obama has been in office for less than eight months and already he appears to be channeling Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam.

The endgame in Iraq appears increasingly likely to be a stalemate at best. Violence remains distressingly high: the latest spate of bombings underlies the weaknesses of the security forces, limits on political reconciliation, and dangers for the future. Baghdad is unlikely to be either a liberal democracy or an American ally. There isn't much for the Obama administration to do but draw down U.S. forces and watch the denouement.

One of the president's most dramatic breaks with the Bush administration was a willingness to talk to America's adversaries. Yet the wheels came off the Barack express with the fraudulent Iranian election and ensuing popular protests. Unsure whether criticism or silence was more prudent, the administration looked ineffective and confused. While engagement remains possible--and, frankly, essential--Washington has found it hard to negotiate with an Iranian government that so recently was breaking demonstrators' heads in the streets and even now is conducting Stalinesque show trials in its courtrooms.

North Korea wasn't even supposed to be on the administration's early agenda. But "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il had other ideas, testing a nuclear weapon, shooting off missiles, and arresting two U.S. journalists. Pyongyang now is proposing negotiation, leaving President Obama, who sharply criticized his predecessor's intransigence, to appear to put procedure before principle in refusing to engage outside of the so-called Six-Party Talks. Yet it isn't clear that negotiation in any setting would be more effective under this administration than the last one.

To his credit, the president is determined to reset relations with Russia. However, talking sweetly has had only limited practical impact on Moscow's attitudes since Washington continues to proclaim its support for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. Yet the administration's best efforts to promote more responsible governance in those two states, including a visit by Vice President Joe Biden, have had equally little effect. Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili seems chastened neither by his military defeat last year nor growing political unrest at home; politics in Kiev retains its soap opera-like quality as America's favorite, President Viktor Yushchenko, blunders his way towards likely defeat in next year's election.

Europe should be an area of expanded cooperation, given President Obama's popularity throughout much of the continent. However, as part of the European Union the Europeans failed to follow his advice to engage in an American-style spending orgy in the name of stimulating the economy. As part of NATO the Europeans affirmed the importance of Afghanistan but refused to commit substantially more troops or resources; to the contrary, even the British now are talking about drawing down their forces. An international film version of *American Alone* appears to be in the offing.

Washington continues to push its stalled project for an independent Kosovo, with the half-recognized state divided by the unrecognized secession of ethnic Serbs in its north. Stubborn controversies between Macedonia and Greece and surrounding Cyprus have grown no less stubborn over the last eight months. After having embraced participation in America's missile defense project, Poland has been estranged by the administration's plan to drop the system.

The U.S. has had no more success winning cooperation from Israel, a nation which has received largely unconditional support in the form of money, weapons, and political backing for decades. Insistence on a freeze in settlement expansion, one of the most serious barriers to peace between Israelis and Palestinians, has been met with shock, hostility, and scorn. Along with the demand to keep writing the blank checks, if you please.

The administration has brought its power and prestige to bear on little Honduras and yet has been unable to force Tegucigalpa to restore Manuel Zelaya to the presidency. President Obama risks going from the sublime to the ridiculous by threatening not to recognize the results of the upcoming, regularly scheduled election which would replace Zelaya even if he was reinstated. The administration appears to be intent on destroying democracy to save it.

It is still early, but the incoming foreign policy team has not been able to turn a friendlier attitude towards Caracas into any relaxation of Hugo Chavez's tightening restrictions on opposition activity. A new and long overdue American openness to dialogue with Cuba has not accelerated reform in that impoverished, oppressed land.

China and India are no more willing today to slow their economies to reduce CO2 emissions at American insistence than when George W. Bush was president. The Japanese election result is likely to reduce Tokyo's readiness to underwrite U.S. geopolitical priorities. Egypt's politics remains as corrupt and authoritarian as ever, despite President Obama's high-profile visit and speech.

In short, the world has turned out to be a lot less malleable and willing to adjust to American preferences than the president may have thought before taking office.

The administration could continue muddling along like most of its predecessors. Just not creating any new policy disasters would be a welcome change from President George W. Bush, who bungled an unnecessary war in Iraq, oversaw North Korea's move towards full nuclear status, and damaged relations with both Europe and Russia. Heck of job, George!

Another option is more intensive intervention. More troops for Afghanistan, more lecturing of Georgia and Ukraine, more pressure on Israel, more threats against Honduras, more sanctions on Iran, more recalcitrance with North Korea, more pleas to Russia, more advice for Iraq. Unfortunately, most of these won't work, and their collective cost is likely to be far higher than the benefits of one or another isolated success.

The better choice would be to do less. Involvement in some issues obviously is inescapable: the U.S. is heavily engaged in Afghanistan, for instance. However, Washington should moderate its objectives. The goal of ousting and weakening al-Qaeda has been achieved. Bringing good governance to Kabul, making Afghanistan drug free, and spreading American culture to Pashtuns, whatever their value, are not worth war. Washington should be working to escape, not escalate.

Expanding NATO into the Caucasus and further along Russia's border reduces rather than increases U.S. security. Washington has no reason to meddle in Honduras' political imbroglio. Rather than badger Israel over its policies, the U.S. should cut official support for the Israeli government and step back from the conflict. Kosovo was never an important concern warranting meddling let alone war. And so on.

World War II and the Cold War turned the American republic into a quasi-empire, engaged in constant intervention and war. The demise of hegemonic communism and rise of populous and prosperous democratic states in Asia and Europe allow the U.S. to return to a more traditional role. President Obama should seize the opportunity and initiate real change in U.S. foreign policy.

The president will suffer the usual failures of his predecessors if he continues to attempt to micro-manage global affairs. To leave a positive legacy, he should move in the other direction, returning America to, in Jeane Kirkpatrick's words, the status of "a normal country in a normal time."

 

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