

**Monday, February 1, 2010**

## Obama's Weakened Position: What Does It Mean For U.S. Foreign Policy?

President Obama is in a rough political patch with the apparent demise of his top domestic priority, universal health care; with the loss of a 60-vote Democratic supermajority in the Senate; with improved Republican prospects for the midterm elections in November; and with his once sky-high approval rating now below 50 percent.

So, what does his weakened position mean for his handling of foreign affairs and for the tack that allies, rivals and outright enemies take toward the U.S.? With his focus on "jobs, jobs, jobs," Obama devoted a grand total of nine minutes to national security issues in his State of the Union address. Does this suggest less activism on the foreign policy front? If so, Obama would be going against the historical pattern, which suggests that a president weakened on the domestic front is likely to become more energetic in foreign affairs as the realm that is less subject to congressional and political control at home (Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon are examples).

In any case, what is the best course for Obama at this juncture? Should he try to improve his standing at home with a prestige-enhancing triumph abroad? Are there such opportunities out there -- for example, a bold deal with the Russians on nuclear disarmament, a tough package of sanctions against Iran, a breakthrough on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Are the Russians, the Chinese, the Pakistanis, the Iranians, the Indians, the Japanese, the Europeans, likelier to be tougher or more accommodating with Obama facing troubles at home? (Or to put it another way: Do any of them want to see Obama fail?) Is a weakened Obama in danger of being seen as another Jimmy Carter -- that is, as an ineffectual president not likely to serve another term? (The analyst Les Gelb of the Council on Foreign Relations is already likening Obama to Carter.) Is his damaged domestic position likely to matter in any way to Al Qaeda and other anti-U.S. Islamic militant groups?

Any and all speculations on this theme are welcome.

-- *Paul Starobin, NationalJournal.com*



**Responded on February 2, 2010 4:23 PM**

### All Politics Is Local

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Yes, it is a horrible cliché, but I don't believe that the president will rely on a major foreign policy initiative to turn around his political fortunes. He has many things on his plate right now, as noted, he spent just

nine minutes on foreign policy in the SOTU, and the American people have clearly signaled a desire to focus on problems here at home.

I'm not entirely happy with this turn of events. I think the country's turn inward -- in the form of trade protectionism, nativism, and anti-immigrant sentiment -- is particularly worrisome. But the wise course for those in Washington is to come up with a foreign policy that can be sustained with a modicum of popular support. They should find a way for us to be engaged in the world without being in charge of it.

So far, I see no evidence of a change away from the assumptions that have guided U.S. foreign policy through four post-Cold War administrations, two Republican and two Democrat (plus GHW Bush for part of his term). The just released QDR repeats many of the same mantras about U.S. power as a global public good that we've heard for years.

Up to now, the practice has been to distort and confuse the purpose of U.S. foreign policy. The policy elite in Washington and New York know that the public expects the U.S. military to be used to advance American security, when in fact much of what it does underwrites the security of others. As Michael Mandelbaum wrote several years ago, "To make sacrifices largely for the benefit of others counts as charity, and for Americans, as for other people, charity begins at home."

Obama and his team, and probably his successor, might manage to sustain the dominant posture for a while longer. Other countries have no great desire to assume responsibilities for their own defense, or for policing their respective regions.

But at the end of the day, all politics is local. Americans can't be expected to care more about things that occur 8,000 miles from our shores than they do about things in the Gulf of Mexico, or in New Mexico. In an era of crushing fiscal imbalance, and an increasingly complex international environment, now presents a great opportunity to revisit some of the core assumptions of the past two decades and ask -- is this where we want to be 20 years from now, with the U.S. military still the world's policeman, and with the rest of the world anxious, querulous and resentful when we use that power, or even when we don't?

If we choose to make a change, even a modest change in the direction of greater burden sharing with allies who have grown too comfortable under the U.S. security umbrella, we might look back on this period fondly. If we don't, we are likely to see it as a missed opportunity.

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