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The Middle East, Russia, and President Obama's Legacy

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THE JUDGMENT OF HISTORY

With the approaching inauguration of Donald J. Trump, we are in the midst of assessing President Barack Obama's legacy. There has been a flurry—indeed, an avalanche—of retrospective pieces as the end of his term nears. Many are couched in terms of how history will judge him—“history,” in this case, usually meaning the opinion of the writer or a handful of experts she or he cites. This reveals a fundamental truth: “history”—however portentously we summon it up—does not judge; people do. That judgment, whether we are speaking of popular opinion or scholarly exegesis, is neither uniform nor fixed. We bring our own biases, acknowledged or not, to any analysis. And, as time passes, we will necessarily view any person or period through the lens of the future. The past, in short, is contested terrain, subject to revision and counter-revision. Our assessment of it, even at its most thoughtful, is contingent, incomplete, and tentative. Scholars continue to argue about the meaning of Reconstruction and the New Deal, of the legacy of Woodrow Wilson or Andrew Jackson. The same will be true of Obama.

Still, there is some purpose to be served by an admittedly quick and partial look at Obama's foreign policy legacy. This is because, even as we discuss how history in the abstract will judge him, the other, anything-but-abstract history—that storm of contradictory, even chaotic, events that drives us, half-blind, into a future we

only dimly perceive—will continue. This is certainly true when it comes to U.S. foreign policy, where the world—whether we are speaking about the civil war in Syria, the ongoing crisis of the European Union, or China's rise—will continue to compel the United States to make decisions of potentially huge import for Americans and, because of the nation's unexampled power, other people around the globe.

Let me make my own biases clear at the outset. I am a foreign policy “realist”¹—though not a doctrinaire one—who is highly suspicious of Wilsonian idealism, whether of the neoconservative or liberal interventionist variety. This suspicion, in turn, is driven by the fear that hubris—a complacent sense of our moral superiority, an inordinate belief in our infallibility, and a dangerous overestimation of our ability to shape events, especially through the use of force—is a particularly acute temptation for a country as powerful as the United States. I am therefore sympathetic to much of Obama's foreign policy. He may not be a “realist” in any strict sense. But his prudence—notably his much-derided motto, “Don't do stupid s---,”² is a welcome tonic in a foreign policy establishment that, by and large, sees every problem around the world as an occasion for U.S. action. In many ways, indeed, Obama is a small-“c” conservative when it comes to foreign policy: wary of precipitous action and conscious of the unpredictable consequences of U.S. military intervention.



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THE OBAMA LEGACY: LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

The issue of Obama's legacy is even more pressing because his successor, Donald Trump, has promised to dismantle much of it, in the foreign and domestic arena alike. How far the new president will or can go in reversing Obama's foreign policy is an open question, one made all the more uncertain by Trump's lack of consistent policy proposals and controlling ideology. During the course of his campaign, Trump made statements—often offhand, and later contradicted—that called into doubt some of the fundamental tenets of post-war U.S. foreign policy in such areas as NATO, nuclear proliferation, and free trade. In this, Trump stands in stark contrast with his opponent, Hillary Clinton, a conventional liberal internationalist with a long track record in foreign policy. Had she won, Clinton would have closely adhered to Obama's policies. There would have been differences, of course. Clinton would have been more likely to resort to military force in Syria and would have assumed a more confrontational stance toward Russia. But we would have seen Obama's broader approach protected and perhaps extended.

Barack Obama has been president for eight years. And eight years in foreign policy can seem like a lifetime. When he assumed office in January 2009, we had yet to experience the Arab Spring, the Ukraine crisis, the emergence of ISIS, and the Syrian civil war. Indeed, looking back, it is hard to recapture the optimism that Obama's assumption of power created both here and abroad (though there were, we should remember, skeptics). Foreign policy might have played little role in his victory over John McCain during the 2008 campaign, which was dominated by the worst financial crisis since the 1930s. But Obama's initial opposition to the Iraq War may well have provided him the edge over Hillary Clinton in their race for the Democratic nomination. Obama's chief appeal when it came to foreign policy was, in many ways, simply that he was not George W. Bush, whose own legacy in the international arena was

dominated by the unpopular Iraq War. Obama's Nobel Peace Prize—awarded mere months after his inauguration—was less an acknowledgment of achievement (of which he had, at that point, essentially none), than an international sigh of relief that President Bush was gone.

Things went reasonably well at first. Obama made a much-admired speech about the Middle East in Cairo; the address seems quaint today, in the wake of the disorder engendered by the Arab Spring and the utter failure of the United States to move the Arab-Israeli peace process forward. He continued to wind down our involvement in Iraq, making much of ending a war that would reignite just years later. He launched a surge in Afghanistan; in retrospect, it was merely another episode in our ultimate failure to achieve decisive victory in what is now a 15-year-old war. He attempted to “reset” relations with Russia that had deteriorated under the Bush administration; those relations collapsed in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Obama focused on domestic matters in the early years of his administration, notably passing Obamacare, cleaning up the financial system, and pushing through an economic stimulus package. As early as 2011, following huge Republican congressional gains in 2010, he found himself mired in a protracted budgetary conflict with a resurgent GOP on the Hill.

When asked about what would throw a government off-course, British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan once famously replied, “Events, my dear boy, events.” Obama would discover this, as many of the early assumptions of his foreign policy— notably a relatively stable Middle East where he could safely reduce U.S. involvement, and a Russia more or less comfortable with the geopolitical status quo—proved questionable. How he responded to these events represents a significant part of his legacy, though not its totality. His efforts on climate change— notably the Paris Accords—were, for instance, less a response to an immediate crisis than an appreciation of the long-term threats associated with global warming. And the “pivot” to Asia reflected a similar long-term focus, in

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this instance on China's historic rise and the potential threats that it posed to U.S. interests in Asia-Pacific (though Beijing's assertive actions in the South China Sea certainly gave the policy impetus).

THE RETREAT CRITIQUE

The idea that the Obama administration marked some historic "retreat" from U.S. leadership in the global arena is a common criticism, both among neoconservatives and liberal internationalists.³ What could be called the "retreat critique" focuses largely on two areas: Obama's policy in the Middle East and Russo-American relations. I will therefore focus on them.

The critique usually elides an obvious question: *retreat from what?*

In the Greater Middle East, for instance, Obama has (re)committed ground forces to Iraq, launched air strikes in at least three other countries, authorized massive arms sales to traditional clients like Israel and the Gulf Arabs, supported a major intervention by one of those clients (Saudi Arabia) in the Yemen, and embarked on major negotiations on two major intractable issues, one of which succeeded (the Iran nuclear deal) and one of which failed (the Arab-Israeli conflict.) True, Obama's policy does mark a retreat, if our benchmark is the first term of the George W. Bush administration, which saw the United States invade and occupy Iraq. But by any reasonable standard, the United States under Obama has remained deeply involved—indeed, arguably, too involved—in the Middle East. Moreover, the failure of his predecessor's unprecedented military intervention in the region decisively shaped Obama's more measured—though still robust—responses to instability.

The Obama administration has been routinely attacked for abandoning U.S. allies in the region, notably the Gulf Arabs and Israel. But given massive arms sales to our Middle East clients, this is a curious "abandonment" of U.S. clients. The evidence given for this abandonment—chiefly the nuclear deal with Iran and our refusal to be drawn further into the Syrian conflict—are in fact instances where the Obama

administration pursued what it believed, rightly or wrongly, to be the U.S. national interest. The idea that we must always and everywhere support the positions of allies is an odd one; it would effectively turn over U.S. foreign policy to clients who do not necessarily share our interests on all issues.

Much of the criticism of Obama's Middle East policy has focused on policy toward Syria and Iran. In the case of Syria, Obama has been assailed for providing insufficient military support to the moderate Syrian opposition. In the case of Iran, Obama is accused of strengthening Iran's hegemonic regional designs by granting it sanctions relief under the nuclear arms deal. These are both areas where reasonable, informed individuals may and indeed do disagree. But they are not, by themselves, signs of American "retreat from leadership." Leadership, after all, is not an end in itself; it is a means. And it has become, in much of the contemporary discourse on U.S. foreign policy, an empty, if emotive, term routinely deployed against specific policies that the invoker opposes. In other words, Obama's policies should be judged on their individual merits, not on some standard of American leadership that is unmoored from an analysis of our interests and a blunt assessment of the risks associated with alternative action.

In particular, we should always approach counterfactual arguments with wariness. A hypothetical foreign policy is always superior to an actual one. Perhaps earlier and more assertive policies in support of Syrian rebels might have yielded a better result, both in humanitarian and strategic terms. But a more interventionist approach might well have plunged us into a quagmire. It should be noted that much of the criticism of Obama's policies has been levied by precisely those elements of the foreign policy establishment (including some liberal internationalists) who most enthusiastically supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This does not mean that we should discard their opinions. But it should raise red flags about what, precisely, they mean by "leadership."

The same is true about U.S. policy toward Russia. The critique of Obama's Russian policy has become particularly vociferous since compelling evidence has

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emerged that Russia intervened in the U.S. election by hacking the emails of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton confidante John Podesta. Many blame these emails, released by Wikileaks, for hurting Clinton's campaign and perhaps denying her victory in a very close election. But U.S.–Russian relations were in steep decline long before 2016.

Ironically, Obama's policy toward Russia shares a similar trajectory with that of George W. Bush. The latter, famously, looked into Vladimir Putin's eyes and liked what he saw. But Bush's optimistic view of Russo–U.S. relations ultimately foundered, notably with Moscow's sharp response to the 2007 U.S. announcement that it intended to place an antiballistic missile system in several Eastern Europe countries and, even more importantly, Russia's 2008 military intervention in Georgia. Obama consciously tried to improve relations on assuming office. This was the famous "reset," symbolized by the presentation of a red button bearing the term by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The reset initially bore some fruit: the two countries concluded the New Start Treaty cutting nuclear arsenals; Russia agreed to allow overflights to support the U.S. war in Afghanistan; and Moscow went along with sanctions on Iran's nuclear program.

But the reset collapsed in 2014 with the Ukraine crisis. The United States supported a popular uprising against the pro-Russian government, helping to replace it with a pro-Western one. Moscow, in response, seized the Crimea and supported separatists in Eastern Ukraine. In retrospect, Russia's response was entirely predictable. The idea that Moscow would stand by and permit an important neighboring country to slip irrevocably into what it perceives as a hostile camp was, in fact, illusory, based in equal parts excitement at Ukraine's democratic revolution and an assumption of Russian weakness.

The U.S. took the lead, working with the EU, in punishing Russia for its Ukraine provocations. The central elements of the response, economic sanctions, have thus

far failed. True, they have damaged—badly damaged—the Russian economy. But they have failed in their goal of altering Russian behavior. Some critics have assailed Obama for his weakness in responding to Russia's Ukraine intervention. But most of them fall far short of calling for U.S. military intervention, which would both raise the risk of war between nuclear powers and likely fracture NATO. A call for more lethal military assistance to the Kiev government is perhaps the most common recommendation, a step of largely symbolic importance. Russia would merely respond by upping its own military support for its surrogates in Eastern Ukraine. In other words, Obama's approach has been grounded in the simple fact that Ukraine is far more important to Russia than it is to the United States. (He can, however, be criticized for failing to understand this before the event; we should not have been blindsided when Russia acted to preserve its position in what it has considered its sphere of influence.) The Minsk process⁴ has shown limited success in averting outright war in Eastern Ukraine. But it has not yielded an outcome that bridges the demands of the Kiev government and those of Moscow and its Ukrainian surrogates. The most likely outcome is a "frozen conflict" of de facto partition of Ukraine and constant tension between the Kiev government and its Western supporters on the one hand, and Moscow and its Ukrainian surrogates in Eastern Ukraine on the other. Russia's seizure and annexation of Crimea, illegal as it was, is perhaps an even more intractable problem. It is hard to imagine any conceivable post-Putin Russian government (even a much more democratic, less adversarial one) simply returning it to Ukraine.

Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria also rattled the Obama administration. It added yet another complication to a multi-sided civil war that had long since been internationalized. And it highlighted the ambiguity—a cynic might call it incoherence—of our approach to the conflict. In Syria, we half-heartedly supported the moderate Syrian opposition—

an inchoate, often ineffective assembly of militias—in its efforts to topple the Assad regime while focusing our direct military intervention on defeating ISIS. Russia's goals exhibited no such ambiguity. Moscow may, like Washington, have believed ISIS to be a profound threat. But it had a ready-made traditional ally in its efforts: the Assad regime. We found ourselves in off-and-on and unsatisfactory cooperation with Russia in various efforts to broker a peace deal. The fundamental principle of Obama's Syria policy—that defeating ISIS was the chief goal while the overthrow of the Assad regime, though desirable, did not rise to a compelling national interest—discouraged any direct conflict with Moscow over the latter's Syrian intervention.

Combined with Moscow's reaction to the overthrow of a pro-Russian government in Ukraine, the 2015 intervention by Russia in Syria gave rise to a narrative of Russian resurgence and reemergence as a global power. Surely, Putin has shown himself willing to act decisively when he perceives Russian interests to be at stake, whether it is the alignment of Ukraine or the survival of Moscow's long-term Syrian ally. But he is merely playing a weak hand very well. Indeed, by a number of important criteria, Russia's geopolitical position today is markedly worse than it was in 2010. Most of Ukraine has slipped, almost certainly irreversibly, out of Moscow's sphere of influence; its Syrian client may be scoring military victories in the field thanks to Russia's help, but the country is, under the best of circumstances, likely to be the site of continued conflict for years to come. The Russian economy itself has been battered by both economic sanctions and low hydrocarbon prices. In other words, we should take Putin's foreign adventurism very seriously indeed; but Russia today does not possess the combination of economic heft and power projection to reconstitute the threat represented by the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. For all their faults, Obama's policies toward Russia at least acknowledged this truth. But Russia's resurgence under Putin has shown that the window of post-Soviet Russian

impotence—a period during which, for instance, NATO expanded relentlessly in the face of toothless Russian objections—is over.

CONCLUSION: THE FIRST POST-POST-COLD WAR PRESIDENT

None of this is to suggest that Obama's policies toward the Middle East and Russia are flawless. The administration, for instance, foolishly underestimated Russia's likely reaction when it perceived Ukraine slipping irretrievably from its sphere of influence. In the Middle East, the president on several occasions used rhetoric that unnecessarily constrained his policy options, notably his declaration that "Assad must go"⁵ and his announcement of a "red line"⁶ on the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons. Obama's policy on Syria, as noted, could appear incoherent; there was a sense that, at times, he acted more out of response to domestic criticism than to any commitment to a definitive strategy. Obama's penchant for relatively modest efforts on behalf of the opposition there, moreover, may well have merely raised expectations without providing effective assistance, thereby actually lengthening the conflict.

President Obama has remained optimistic⁷ about the future role of the United States in world affairs, but he is perhaps better described as a "chastened liberal internationalist." It may be unfair to call him a "declinist"—the willing instrument of U.S. retrenchment from an unsustainable international position. But he surely understands that the unipolar moment—running roughly from the end of the Cold War through the full emergence of China earlier in this century—has passed. What many believed at the time to be a phenomenon that marked both a permanent victory of liberal democracy and a vindication of U.S. global dominance has proved to be ephemeral. We are moving toward a multipolar world. Geopolitics still matters. Even so powerful a country as the United States is severely limited in its ability to foresee future events,

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much less control them. Risks abound; unanticipated consequences, particularly in the Middle East, are a rule, not an exception. Public support for an assertive foreign policy is simply not a given. For all his faults, President Obama understood this unfortunate, but unalterable, set of realities. To this extent, Obama should be considered the first *post post*-Cold War president. And this may well be his most important legacy.

ENDNOTES

1. See "Realism, International Relations," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_\(international_relations\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_(international_relations)).
2. David Rothkopf, "Obama's 'don't do stupid s---' foreign policy," *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2014.
3. The retreat critique has become something of a cottage industry. See, for instance, *The Washington Post* at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fred-hiatt-obamas-foreign-policy-reveals-the-effects-of-disengagement/2014/07/27/4c0f9452-1284-11e4-8936-26932bcfd6ed_story.html?utm_term=.88ed775a222d and https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-dispensable-nation-american-foreign-policy-in-retreat-by-vali-nasr/2013/05/03/b7b01178-ac14-11e2-a198-99893f10d6dd_story.html?utm_term=.98fb5c773fb2; *World Affairs Journal* at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/diplomacy-aversion-power-consequences-retreat>; and *Foreign Affairs* at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/what-obama-gets-wrong>.
4. See "Minsk II" at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsk_II.
5. Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad must go, Obama says," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011.
6. Glenn Kessler, "President Obama and the 'red line' on Syria's chemical weapons," *The Washington Post*, September 6, 2013.
7. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

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