

The Obama Foreign Policy: a critical analysis *

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It is a great pleasure to return to the Argentine Council on International Relations after a period of eight years since my last visit. It is my fifth appearance at the Council and I want to thank Felipe de la Balze for initiating this invitation. As many of you know, CARI has had a close association with the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations from the beginning. I remember meeting with Ambassador Carlos Muniz, Ambassador Jorge Aja Espil and several colleagues in Buenos Aires in June of 1978, discussing their plans to establish CARI, which they launched several months later. It has been a deeply gratifying experience to observe how during the last three and a half decades CARI has become one of the leading foreign policy institutions in the Western hemisphere. Thanks to the generosity of Federico Merke, a longtime young protégé of Carlos Muniz, my wife Irene and I had the honor of visiting Carlos' grave at Jardín de Paz Cemetery on Saturday. It reminded us again of the indispensable role of Carlos at CARI. It is therefore an honor as well as a pleasure to return to this platform.

My subject today is the Obama foreign policy and how one should assess it after almost four and a half years in office. While attending two foreign policy conferences last month in Europe, one in France and one in Germany, I was told repeatedly that Europeans are disappointed in Obama, that he has not met the high expectations they held for him when he was inaugurated over four years ago, that his popularity has greatly declined. No doubt that is true. Their expectations were stratospheric and wholly unrealistic. An important reason for his soaring popularity was that he was not George W Bush, who was universally loathed in Europe. And not only in Europe: by his second term, Bush was loathed in the US as well. In those years I used to joke with a close Argentine friend who has held high positions in the Menem government that we would gladly trade Bush for a Kirchner -either one, confident that we would come out ahead!

By the time Obama was inaugurated in January of 2009, his first challenge was to restore the reputation of the US in the world. After the disastrous Iraq intervention, the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, a unilateral approach that ignored the interests of both allies and adversaries, the practice of torture and the incarceration of prisoners without trial in Guantanamo, by 2007 the Bush administration had made the US a pariah in much of the world. A Stern magazine poll that year revealed that two thirds of Germans believed the United States represented a greater threat to world peace than Iran, a sentiment shared in many countries of the world.

The challenge to restore America's reputation was impeded by the financial crisis which President Obama inherited. With the economy already in deep recession and the American finance system collapsing, Obama acknowledged that the crisis was largely made in the USA. By early 2009 many in the world had come to view the American free market capitalist model as a "twitching corpse". The decades-long movement toward market liberalization had stopped and a new wave of state intervention, regulation and protectionism has begun. The progress of globalization promoted by both Presidents Clinton and Bush was reversing. Global trade, capital flows and immigration were declining. The China model with its insulated financial system was becoming more and more attractive.

Even before the financial crises hit in the autumn of 2008, the economic position of the US had seriously eroded. The US had become the world's largest debtor and was absorbing 75% of the world's savings. Because the US financed the Iraq war on a credit card, we ended up with 400-500 billion dollar budget deficits almost every year. The dollar declined against the euro 50% in a three year period. Instead of raising taxes and reducing domestic expenditure, which occurred during most wartime periods, the Bush administration expanded domestic spending by 32%

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during the first term while increasing domestic consumption and while reducing taxes.

So how did President Obama respond to this greatly weakened US economic position in the world? Obama said that he wanted to reorient US foreign policy to something less extravagant and adversarial, to be more discriminating in its commitments, and in the long run to substantially reduce them. But he found himself in the midst of two wars, neither of which was going well. So sharply reducing out military commitment in Afghanistan was deemed politically impossible at that moment. Instead he expanded our military commitments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Obama was persuaded by General Petraeus that he, Petraeus, could achieve the same success in Afghanistan that had occurred after the “surge” in Iraq. The defense budget for Obama’s second year was over 700 billion, an increase of \$100 billion over 2009. The US budget deficit for the past three years has approached 1.5 trillion dollars, the highest ever.

Nevertheless, President Obama reversed the US position on a number of important issues. He has given a high priority to progress on climate change, albeit with limited results so far. He has abolished torture and the practice of rendition. He took a decision to close Guantanamo, but found it impossible so far to implement it, though he has recently renewed his determination to close it. He stated early on a preference for diplomacy over military action in implementing US foreign policy, although he would come to reverse his posture by his third year in office. His early initiative to move forward on the Israel/Palestine issue ended in failure.

Unlike George W Bush, who publicly denounced nations like North Korea, Iran and Cuba as part of the axis of evil, Obama took the opposite view, favoring a policy of “engagement”. He offered to meet with the leaders of such hostile nations pointing out that we had regular contact for half a century with the top leaders of our mortal enemy, the Soviet Union. While recognizing the continuing threat of terrorism, Obama abandoned the “war on terror” as the overarching framework for US policy. He has stated that the terrorist threat, while real, should not be exaggerated and is a lesser threat than we faced for almost half a century from a hostile nuclear armed Soviet Union. He has avoided the term “Islamic terrorism”, pointing out that most Muslims are peaceful and only a small minority support terrorism. He has assured the Islamic world that the US is not opposed to Islam and there is no essential dichotomy between Islam and the West.

Up until 2012, President Obama continued the policy of engagement with China followed by both the Clinton and Bush administrations. When Secretary of State Clinton visited China in 2009 she refrained from any lectures about human right. Obama followed suit in his later visit. While President Obama rhetorically reaffirmed the American interest in human rights, he indicated in his July 2009 press conference that in any conflict between state sovereignty and intervening to protect human rights, the threshold at which international intervention is appropriate I think has to be very high. He recognized that in many societies today, political legitimacy is a function of performance, not process. China does not have a democratic government, but its government is viewed as legitimate by 90% of the population. Obama understood that a single sustainable model for national success –the American model– does not resonate with a majority of the people on the planet. Given China’s increasing military surge during the past year and a half, especially in the South China Sea, Obama has adopted a firmer policy supporting some of China’s neighbor’s claimants in the South China Sea, and stationing American marines in Australia. Obama’s meeting in early June of this year with China’s new President Xi resulted in agreements in principle to extend US-China cooperation.

Obama elevated the priority of relations with Russia and cancelled plans to deploy anti-missile radar in the Czech Republic and Poland, removing what Russia considered the greatest provocation. President Obama also negotiated two agreements to extend the START treaty, one with President Medvedev and one in June of 2013 with President Putin, which together will reduce US – Russia nuclear weapons to a level of one thousand. At the same time, the imminent threats to the diffusion of nuclear weapons come not from Russia or the US, but from Iran, Pakistan and North Korea.

While recognizing the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, Obama nevertheless reappointed Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a Republican, a man widely known to be strongly opposed to any military action against Iran, either by Israel or by the United States. Although for domestic political reasons, Obama has continued to state publicly that “no options are off the table”, Obama is widely believed to consider military action to be the worst alternative on the Iran nuclear issue, a judgment widely shared by top military officials, as well as defense secretary Robert Gates and newly appointed Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel.

But while opposing military action against Iran, Obama early on ordered increasingly sophisticated attacks on the computer systems that run Iran's main nuclear enrichment facilities. In doing so he significantly expanded America's first sustained use of cyber weapons. According to David Sanger of the New York Times, this appears to be the first time the US has repeatedly used cyber weapons to cripple another country's infrastructure, achieving with computer code what until then could be achieved by bombing a country or sending agents to plant explosives. The impetus for the computer attacks, named Olympic Games, started in 2006 under President George W. Bush. With Israel threatening a military attack on Iran unless economic sanctions proved to be more effective in halting Iran's progress in processing uranium, Obama greatly expanded the cyber-attacks. According to most evidence, they were effective in sabotaging Iranian efforts to achieve a critical level of enriched uranium, on several occasions knocking out at least 1000 Iranian centrifuges. Obama has acknowledged that no country's infrastructure is more dependent on computers and thus vulnerable to attack than the US. Despite this, he has continued to authorize the cyber-attacks.

While conducting these covert activities against Iran, Obama has continued to press for tightened economic and financial sanctions against Iran with considerable success. The blocking of Iran's oil exports beginning this past summer has been particularly painful for the current Iranian regime.

Cyber-attacks are not the only area where Obama expanded the use of new technologies against perceived terrorist threats. He greatly expanded the use of Predator drones, an advanced device which can target and kill individuals or weapons with remarkable precision. Obama has reportedly overseen the choice of targets primarily in Pakistan and Yemen, including targeting an American citizen, Anwar Al Alwaki. This greatly expanded program of targeted assassinations has raised serious constitutional as well as humanitarian issues. And of course, Obama's most daring covert initiative was the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan by US Navy Seals. Thus, by the beginning of his second term in office, it was clear that Obama was as aggressive if not more so than George W Bush in using American power against selected enemies. And contrary to his professed commitment to acting multilaterally, these have all been unilateral actions.

The dominant influence and chief foreign policy strategist in the Obama administration has been the

President himself. It has been Obama's ideas that have determined the American role in the world for the past four and one half years. But rather than relying principally on the ranking cabinet officers, except for Defense Secretary Bob Gates, Obama has relied more heavily on his small informal network of close aides, all of whom worked with him in the 2008 campaign and most of whom previously worked as staff in the US Senate or House. What is unequivocally clear is that not since President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger has foreign policy been so closely centered in the oval office.

While differences between Obama and Bush are clearly evident on the above, on some other key issues, continuity with Bush prevails, including issues like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq, and on relations with India and China. Although Obama strongly opposed the American military interventions in Iraq, in office he has largely continued the policies in place during the final months of the Bush administration, although accelerating the pace of trip withdrawal and opposing leaving permanent military bases there. Despite Republican criticism, Obama adhered to the 2011 date set by President Bush for complete withdrawal of all US combat troops by the end of December 2011.

And despite the fact that the security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan has deteriorated, Obama has set a deadline to have all combat troops out of Afghanistan by 2014.

Obama's reluctance to intervene in conflicts that do not directly threaten American national interests was indicated by his hesitant response to the French/British initiative to use military force to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Libya. Reversing his position, Obama eventually authorized limited air and intelligence support for the NATO effort. But he acted only within a NATO multilateral framework. Despite harsh Republican criticism, he has until recently refused to support any substantive military intervention in Syria. During the past month, as the situation has deteriorated into a civil war, Obama has reluctantly agreed to provide small military arms to Syrian rebels, as well as to continue covert training of Syrian rebels in Lebanon and Turkey. But Obama has been both hesitant and inconsistent on Syria, indicating strong opposition to US military involvement and yet currently indicating a willingness to provide limited military help, but so limited that, according to most experts it will be no match for the vastly increased military aid to the Assad regime by Russia, Hezbollah and Iran.

After almost a decade of involvement in wars in Iraq in Afghanistan, popular support for American involvement in the world is fading. According to a recent Chicago Council on World Affairs poll, only 40% of Americans to day believe that the US should take an active role in the world, the lowest support level for American involvement in many decades. A majority believe the US should mind its own business and reduce its involvement in the world.

By the beginning of the second term of the Obama government, it had become increasingly apparent that a huge gap exists between the foreign policy philosophy espoused by Obama during his first year and his actions during the past two years. In his principal speeches in 2009, he emphasized the need for restraint in the use of American power, echoing his heroes George Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr. In his December 2009 speech he said that, “as President I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means or our interests”. Rejecting the George W Bush goal of nation building, Obama said that the only nation he wants to build is “our own”. That same year he exhorted Americans to refrain from lecturing other nations on how to run their societies. He acknowledged American mistakes and encouraged Americans to show greater reluctance to involve the US in the internal affairs of other nations. In his Nobel speech in Oslo in December 2009, he echoed his hero Reinhold Niebuhr, acknowledging the presence of evil in the world and stating that we should be modest in our belief that that we can eliminate those things. He spoke of our strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct” and of the need “to balance two seemingly irreconcilable truths that war is both folly and necessary”.

Yet, in 2011 and 2012 in launching cyber-attacks on another nation that has not attacked the US, and in vastly expanding the use of Predator drones to assassinate designated enemies, Obama has shown anything but restraint in the use of American power and has ignored his exhortation to “bind ourselves to certain rules of conduct”. He has also completely ignored any legitimate rules of conduct in allowing the vast expansion of surveillance of American citizens and foreigners by electronic intelligence methods, thereby further upsetting the balance between citizen privacy and government secrecy. In the past two weeks, he has further strained relations with European allies due to reports that US intelligence has been monitoring the offices of the European Union and selected European embassies in Washington.

During President Obama’s first two years in of-

fice, he gave some indication that he might reexamine the claim that the US possesses an exceptional status among nations that confers upon it special responsibilities and exceptional privileges in meeting those responsibilities. When asked at a NATO summit in Strasbourg in 2009 if he believes in American exceptionalism, Obama replied that he believes in American exceptionalism “just as I suspect that most Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism”.

It is of course almost a heresy to suggest that the US does not have a unique moral status and role to play in today’s world. However, even Francis Fukuyama, a recovering neoconservative and Bush supporter has acknowledged in a recent book that American foreign policy rests on an unearned claim to privilege, that the American “belief in American exceptionalism is one that most non-Americans simply find not credible”. In suggesting that we should not try to export our model for the world to emulate, Obama may end up tempering the belief in American exceptionalism.

Although Obama increased the defense budget by 100 billion during his first year, by the end of his third year he concluded that the defense budget would no longer be exempt from budget cuts. Therefore, at a minimum, 500 billion must be cut over the next decade. He had concluded that American could no longer afford to do everything, fight every war, or remake every failed state. Henceforth, the emphasis would be on Special Operations, not occupying armies, resulting in a sharp reduction in conventional forces in Europe and the Middle East. The US must have a lighter footprint around the world, must rely on coalitions to deal with global problems that do not directly threaten American security and must rebalance American forces away from the Middle East and toward Asia.

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen stated last year that America’s foremost security problem is its massive indebtedness. Obama concurs and has recognized that given America’s vast indebtedness, declining economic power and political gridlock, the US could, at best, remain first among equals in the world but could no longer afford the burdens of being a sole superpower.

Often an American President has accomplished more in the foreign policy field in this his second term, now free from political restraints, as he will not face re-election. Yet some of the issues of the

first term will not go away. The timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan remains a contentious issue. The situation in Syria continues to deteriorate and it now appears less likely than earlier that Assad will be removed. If he does fall, the question of what follows becomes a more important issue, just as it did in Egypt or Libya. Developments internally in Egypt, now governed by an Islamic party, will greatly determine America's relationship with the Islamic world. Meanwhile Iran remains the one of the most sensitive issues since even the more moderate new President of Iran is likely to continue its efforts to acquire a nuclear capability.

During the first four years, Obama's policy toward Latin America has, with some exceptions, been one of "benign neglect". He has reacted positively to the rise of Brazil, being the first American president in a century to visit Brazil before the Brazilian President visited Washington. And Obama has continued the policy of President Bush in practicing admirable restraint in responding to the taunts of leftist populists like Venezuela's Chavez and Ecuador's Correa.

Now reelected, Obama will be free to reverse US policy toward Cuba, long an anomaly. The prospects for opening up and engaging with Cuba will depend partly on the Cuban response. If the Cuban government follows the example of Myanmar and signals its readiness to respond to US initiatives, then the prospects for a rapprochement with Cuba are promising.

Clearly the most formidable long range challenge that Obama will face is how to engage an increasingly powerful China. Early indications suggest that fewer reform-minded officials will occupy key posts in the new Chinese government. As resentment intensifies against the pervasive corruption in government at all levels, a growing internal instability may occur. This may lead the Chinese government to follow an increasingly nationalist policy, attempting to unite the Chinese people by focusing on an external enemy – whether the United States or Japan. This may tempt Obama, who has already rattled the Chinese by stationing Marines in Australia, to abandon the policy of "engagement", that has been followed by every American president since Nixon, for a policy of containment.

While the United States should maintain a sturdy military presence in Asia, American policy should not aim to deny China its place in the sun, a place it occupied for centuries before the Western conquest of China during the 19th and 20th centuries. Engagement remains the correct policy, not containment.

What do the recent appointments of Secretary of State John Kerry, Hagel and White House Counterterrorism Director John Brennan to the CIA Director tell us about the likely direction of foreign policy during the second Obama administration? If there is one thing that unites all of them it is disengagement, cutting back on America's commitments abroad. Above all it means disengagement from the Middle East where America's new found sources of domestic energy make cutting back in the Middle East a historical necessity. This is consistent with Obama's earlier call for a "light footprint". Both Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel have emphasized more reliance on diplomacy rather than flexing our military muscles. It is consistent with Obama's policy of restraint during his first two years, now freed from the obligation to prove that Democrats are not weak on national security, some will conclude that the recent appointment of Ambassador Susan Rice as National Security Advisor and Samantha Power as United Nations Ambassador, both of whom pressed Obama to intervene in Libya, means that humanitarian issues will play a larger role in the second Obama administration. So far neither one of them has advocated a greater involvement in Syria and are not likely to overcome Obama's resistance to military intervention.

The greatest threat to a successful foreign policy during the second Obama term remains the ongoing political gridlock in Washington. It appears highly unlikely that Democrats will regain control of the US House of Representatives. So Republican leaders are likely to oppose Obama on every possible issue. Although a President has greater independence from the Congress in the field of foreign policy, still all appropriations must be approved by Congress. While Obama believes that Pax Americana is over, he still believes America can and must provide leadership. But Obama's ability to provide that leadership will depend in great part on ending –or at least mitigating– the gridlock that prevails in Washington today.

Obama and his new team will quietly seek to implement Admiral Mike Mullen's view that the greatest threat to America's security is our massive indebtedness. Although the US is still likely to remain the dominant military power for a long time to come, its time as a Pax Americana is over.