

## Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy and Rising Powers

by Tarık OĞUZLU

When Obama came to presidency in January 2009, he wanted to achieve two specific goals. One was to help improve the tarnished image of the United States during the reign of George W. Bush, whereas the other to put his country on a solid ground in the wake of the financial crises in 2008. It was very clear from the first day of his presidency that he would become a domestic politics president mainly focusing on internal issues, rather than spending the United States' dwindling capabilities in expensive foreign policy adventures abroad. The thinking was that should the United States mend its deteriorating relations with great powers, such as China and Russia, adopt a multilateral approach in relations with the European allies, particularly within NATO, get away from the never ending nation-building exercises in the Middle East, improve relations with Muslim countries by scaling down the democracy promotion agenda, outsource the responsibility of providing security to other regional allies in different quarters of the world, and finally opening to erstwhile enemies, such as Iran and Cuba, in such a way to help them integrate into existing liberal world order, then the United States would be in a much better position to deal with myriad economic social and political problems at home.



'Strategic patience' and 'leading from behind' were two fashionable concepts of Obama's foreign policy paradigm. While the first suggests that the United States would do well to be patient now to see the rewarding consequences of its restraint policies materialize later, the second underlines the importance of letting other global and regional actors take initiatives in the solution of crises. Opening to erstwhile enemies and helping other global powers become integrated into the existing international system would eventually decrease the burden on the United States to act as the sole global security provider.

Such a foreign policy outlook seems to have led many pundits to conclude that the United States under Obama has adopted the so-called restraint/retrenchment policy. Some argued that Obama became the first American president of the emerging post-American world. Obama seems to have acquiesced to the view that the United States would do well to recognize its limits in shaping global politics and become a smart pow-

er by pooling its hard and soft power capabilities in a more efficient and optimal way. To Obama, the era of unipolar US hegemony appears to have come to an end with the spectacular rise of non-western powers, notably China, and following the immense negative consequences of the economic crisis in the final years of the Bush presidency on US economy.

Obama's thinking seems to have been profoundly affected by his personal life story in that his multicultural and multireligious family background as well as skin color pushed him to adopt a more accommodating approach towards other global players and set in motion a new beginning with other countries on the basis of the idea that unity in diversity could be achieved at global level should the US throw the neoconservative agenda of the Bush presidency into the dustbin of history. To him adopting a more realist than liberal foreign policy approach and accommodating other global and rising powers would more likely contribute to global peace and stability. If others saw themselves sailing in the same ship and were respected by the most powerful global actor then they would deem the existing world order legitimate.

Against such a background, this short essay tries to assess to what extent Obama's assumptions and foreign policy choices have contributed to the peace and stability across the globe. The first point to underline is that neither Russia nor China seems to have bought into Obama's assumptions. The United States' relations with Russia and China have chilled over the last eight years. Putin's Russia has adopted a more assertive foreign policy approach and turned out to become a more Eurasian/Asian country than European/

western and tended to interpret Obama's restraint policy as an invitation for Russia to play more domineering roles in the wider Black Sea and greater Middle Eastern regions. The reset policy with Russia did not yield the expected outcomes, as Moscow continued to dispute the benign character of United States' intentions and has shaken up the foundations of regional security orders in Europe and Middle East. Russia has adopted an exemplary *realpolitik* foreign policy stance and challenged the cardinal principle of Westphalian international order, i.e. respecting territorial integrity of states, by annexing Crimea and getting militarily involved in Syria.

Revitalizing Russia as a Eurasian empire, improving Russia's conventional and nuclear weapons capabilities in this regard, underlining Russia's unique civilizational identity, defining Russia as the only true European nation that could potentially salvage what have been left from the wreckage of post-modern EU integration process, increasing efforts to eat away at US-led liberal order, coming further closer to China in such a way to help lessen western pressure on Russia and forge an anti-American alliance, and transforming Russia into a game changer country in Europe and Middle East have constituted Russia's main foreign policy goals during the eight years of Obama's presidency.

Similarly, China has become a more assertive *realpolitik* security actor during Obama's presidency. Two factors appear to have accelerated this turn on China's side. First, in the wake of the global economic crisis in 2008, Chinese leaders came to the conclusion that while the crisis dented US power and influence across the globe, China and other non-western rising powers were

not affected severely by the crisis. Second, the so-called pivot policy of the United States, re-branded as rebalancing in later years, seems to have led the Chinese leadership to believe that US efforts to help increase its military and economic presence in East and South East Asia as well as improving security cooperation with traditional American allies in the region mainly aimed at containing China's rise. The exclusion of China from the Transpacific Partnership Initiative seems also to have buttressed China's misgivings about the intentions of the United States in East and South East Asia.

Following the coming to power of Xi Jinping in Beijing, China has adopted a more assertive stance in its region by questioning the legitimacy of security order in the region. Challenging the maritime status quo in East China and South China seas, increasing area-denial and anti-access military capabilities, declaring air defense identification zone in East China Sea, announcing the One Belt One Road initiative in such a way to increase China's centrality in global trade and development networks, establishing the Asian Infrastructure and Development Bank, taking the privilege of its membership in the United Nations Security Council to challenge the legitimacy of the US-led global order, but-tressing its defense and economic cooperation with Russia, defying the jurisdiction of international courts with respect to the sovereignty claims in South China Sea have all materialized during the reign of President Obama.

Obama's approach to European allies has not produced the expected outcomes either. Over the last eight years, the European allies have grown extremely uneasy about the credibility of Amer-

ican commitment to European security, particularly given the increasing Russian attempts at questioning the fundamentals of European security order. Europeans have also gotten extremely upset about the US pivot to East Asia and Obama's reluctance to play an active role in bringing the Syrian crisis to a successful end. To many Europeans the exposition of European societies to growing number of migrants and refugees, predominantly originating from the wider Middle East and North Africa regions, can be mainly attributed to the lack of American leadership in the solution of festering security problems in these areas.

The indecisive American approach during the course of the Arab Spring and the internal war in Syria, particularly Obama's acquiescence to the breach of his red lines by Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons against the opposition forces in August 2013, seem to have contributed to the erosion of the United States' credibility and leadership traits in the eyes of traditional American allies in Europe and the Middle East. The nuclear agreement signed with Iran in the summer of 2015 also increased the question marks in the United States' regional allies, particularly Israel, Saudi Arabia and kingdoms in the Gulf, with respect to the credibility of American commitment to their security.

US policies in Egypt have also added up to the erosion of United States' reliability and credibility as a security provider. First supporting the removal of Mubarak from power in the name of giving a chance to building democracy in Egypt, then conniving the non-democratic and illiberal policies of the Morsi regime in the name of preserving stability in Egypt and the region, and

then getting along well with Sisi's military regime from a pragmatic perspective have aggravated security concerns of allies. Similar concerns do also exist on the part of the American allies in Asia. For many American allies in East and South East Asia relations with Washington and Beijing are equally important. These allies do not want to find themselves in the nightmarish situation of having to choose either of them. They want to both benefit from closer economic relations with China and see that the United States come to their aid should China threatens the regional status quo. They both value China's integration into the existing world order as a responsible stakeholder and want to see that China is given more say in the management of global and regional affairs.

Withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan without any satisfactory political settlement being reached in these countries, and the signing of the nuclear deal with Iran have not improved the security anxieties of the allies either. Iran seems to have gained most out of such American policies. Not only has the regime in Tehran gotten free of the economic embargos but also Iran's geopolitical influence in the region, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, has skyrocketed.

Obama's uncertain behavior in the course of the multinational struggle against ISIS has also left a bitter taste in overall American-Turkish relations. Investing in the political and military capabilities of the Syrian Kurds, mostly represented by PYD-YPG, in the fight against ISIS has put the two NATO allies on a collision course. Turkish authorities are extremely uneasy about the United States' relations with PYD, which

Ankara considers the Syrian branch of the PKK terrorist organization. Any Kurdish political gain in northern Syria, should it particularly take place as a federal entity within a post-Assad Syria, would be anathema to Ankara. From Ankara's perspective the defeat of ISIS and PYD are equally important in terms of Turkey's national security interest, whereas the United States is still predisposed to view the PYD as a credible ally in the fight against ISIS. The United States' reluctance to support Turkey's ongoing struggle against the so-called FETO terrorist organization also adds insult to injury in the course of worsening Turkish-American relations.

As Obama has now reached the end of his presidency, the world is not in a better situation than it was on the eve of his coming to power in early 2009. Great powers, such as Russia and China, are on ascendance and the possibility of great power confrontation is not too distant. Chaos and instability still lingers in the North Africa and wider Middle Eastern region. Traditional American allies do now have serious reservations concerning the ability of the United States to act as a credible security provider as well to serve as the lead actor of the liberal world order. Obama was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 without performing any real foreign policy action during his presidency. The question is if he should consider giving it back at the end of his term.

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### ***About Author***

Prof. Dr. Tarık Oğuzlu is currently the Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences and the Director of the Center for Social, Economic and Political Research (SEPAM, [www.sepam.antalya.edu.tr](http://www.sepam.antalya.edu.tr)) at Antalya International University. He holds a Ph.D. degree in International Relations taken from Bilkent University in 2003. He holds a Master of Science degree in International Relations taken from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2000 as well as a Master of Arts degree in International Relations taken from Bilkent University in 1998. He was granted the Jean Monnet Scholarship of the European Commission in 1999. He works on the following subjects: international relations theories, Europeanization of foreign policy, European Union foreign and security policy, transatlantic relations, Turkish foreign policy, Turkey's relations with EU and NATO/US, Turkey-Greece relations, Cyprus dispute, Turkey and the Middle East. He is one of the co-editors of the book "Turkey's Rise as an Emerging Power". He has academic articles published in such journals as Political Science Quarterly, Washington Quarterly, Middle East Policy, International Journal, Security Dialogue, Middle Eastern Studies, Turkish Studies, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, European Security, International Spectator, Contemporary Security Policy, Mediterranean Politics, Australian Journal of International Affairs, Journal of Balkans and Near Eastern Studies, Insight Turkey and Uluslararası İlişkiler, etc. He writes policy briefs on international politics and security issues for SEPAM and BILGESAM ([www.bilgesam.org/en](http://www.bilgesam.org/en))