



## President Obama's Foreign Policy: Year One

During his first year in office, President Obama made several consequential decisions on a wide range of national security issues. Key among those were his decisions, bucking many in his party, to extend the timeline for withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq and to send tens of thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan to defeat al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Despite these courageous decisions, President Obama initiated several startling changes in American foreign policy during his first year as president. Some were stylistic or cosmetic. But as the year wore on, President Obama launched numerous efforts that signaled a new interpretation of America's role in the world.

In this regard, President Obama's words and deeds have aimed to successfully manage what some see as America's inevitable decline relative to rising powers in Asia, notably China. This has necessitated, on the part of the administration, a deliberate attempt to downplay traditional understandings of American might (two ongoing wars notwithstanding), American alliances (most importantly with other democracies), and American ideals (namely the cause of democracy promotion and human rights). Any prediction about the direction of the Obama administration's foreign policy hinges on the degree to which it will continue on this unprecedented course or, alternately, come to terms with, and build upon, a tradition that accepts America's role as the world's indispensable nation.

Whatever the president's intentions, the results of his actions have been controversial. Obama's detractors blame, among other things, his belief in a newly humble America; his supporters note the severe challenges the administration faced upon coming into power. What follows is a review of President Obama's first year in foreign policy, using the words of several outside observers.

Concerning President Obama's decision to keep troops in Iraq through 2011, FPI's Jamie Fly and Abe Greenwald wrote in [Forbes](#), "Originally a surge skeptic, President Barack Obama demonstrated bravery and leadership in revising the drawdown schedule he had touted during his campaign so as not to risk the dangers of a premature exit." On President Obama's decision to send 30,000 additional soldiers to Afghanistan, William Kristol and Fred Kagan wrote the following in [The Weekly Standard](#):

*"When all the rhetorical and other problems are stripped away, the fact remains that Obama has, in his first year in office, committed to doubling our forces in Afghanistan and embraced our mission there. Indeed, the plan the president announced [at West Point] features a commendably rapid deployment of reinforcements to the theater, with most of the surge forces arriving over the course of this winter, allowing them to be in position before the enemy's traditional fighting season begins."*

Apart from the decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan, President Obama's foreign policy breaks sharply with that of his predecessor.

In the [Wall Street Journal](#), Eliot Cohen recently said of Obama's first year: "It began with apologies to the Muslim world that went nowhere..." Indeed, President Obama gave his first formal interview to the Dubai-based Al Arabiya network. In that interview, the president said of Middle East tensions, "all too often the United States starts by dictating -- in the past on some of these issues -- and we don't always know all the factors that are involved. So let's listen." Obama went on to say, "my job is to communicate to the American people that the Muslim world is filled with extraordinary people who simply want to live their lives and see their children live better lives. My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy. We sometimes make mistakes. We have not been perfect." The President closed his interview with a defining vow: "if countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will find an extended hand from us."

Obama built on this sentiment with a videotaped Persian new year (Nowruz) greeting in which he pledged to cease American "threats" toward Iran's leadership, and replace them a policy of "respect" for the regime. In Ankara, he announced to the Turkish Parliament that America is not, and will never be, at war with Islam. In Cairo, he struck a contrite note while becoming the first sitting American president to apologize for the U.S. involvement in the 1953 coup to depose Iranian president Mohammed Mosaddeq . Also, in his Cairo speech, Obama lent gratuitous support to Muslims who believe that women should cover up un public.

If Iranian cooperation on nuclear disarmament and an opening for resumed Israel-Palestinian peace talks were the strategic goals of Obama's apologetics, Cohen's assessment of an approach that "went nowhere" is correct. As [Charles Krauthammer](#) noted,

*"Unilateral American concessions and offers of unconditional engagement have moved neither Iran nor [other antagonistic countries] to accommodate us. Nor have the Arab states--or even the powerless Palestinian Authority--offered so much as a gesture of accommodation in response to heavy and gratuitous American pressure on Israel."*

When Iran's fraudulent June election resulted in a preposterous victory for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Obama doubled down on his goodwill gamble. While Iranian protesters took to the streets, the American president vowed to impotently "bear witness" as the regime in Tehran enacted a program of brutality against its citizens. This resulted not merely in a lack of regime cooperation, but a loss of American popularity among Iran's democrats. As Robert Kagan wrote in [World Affairs](#), "Obama's strategy toward Iran has placed the United States objectively on the side of the government's efforts to return to normalcy as quickly as possible, rather than in league with the opposition's efforts to prolong the crisis. Engagement with Tehran has meant a studious disengagement from the regime's opponents."

In the [Wall Street Journal](#), Akbar Atri and Mariam Memarsadeghi wrote, "Many Iran experts have warned that displays of Western solidarity could taint Iran's democrats. Nonsense. Iranian cyberspace is brimming with anger at what the Green Movement sees as betrayal by the West. From legendary filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi's representative in Europe, to Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, Iranian democrats are expressing disappointment at what they see as the trading of their democratic aspirations for dubious progress toward the goal of preventing a nuclear Iran."

As for the Middle East peace part of the gambit, Elliott Abrams wrote in [The Weekly Standard](#), "[The Obama administration's] initial goals have all been missed. Israelis, Palestinians, and Arab governments have lost confidence in American leadership." Abrams goes on, "In Arab capitals the failure of the United States to stop Iran's nuclear program is understood as American weakness in the struggle for dominance in the Middle East, making additional cooperation from Arab leaders on Israeli-Palestinian issues even less likely."

In another [Weekly Standard](#) piece, Abrams had this to say of Obama's dealings with human rights abusers:

*"Under a policy of promoting human rights and democracy, the United States should be focusing its policies toward such countries on what goes on within them, on supporting democracy activists and promoting the expansion of freedom, on opposing repressive regimes and working when we can to undermine them. But the approach Obama is taking is the almost inevitable product of elevating multilateral diplomacy, for you don't conduct diplomacy with demonstrators and bloggers, much less with political prisoners. You conduct it with the guy across the table, behind the placard that reads 'Iran' or 'Myanmar' or 'Egypt.'"*

A similar problem can be discerned in President Obama's policy toward China. In November, the president made his first visit to this rising power. The trip was most notable for the various ways in which Beijing got the better of Washington. Obama was not only unable to forge any significant trade or environmental initiatives, but was also so stage-managed by the communist party that he failed to present a robust American case for human rights in the autocratic country. At [National Review's blog, The Corner](#), Gordon Chang wrote,

*"What the president does not understand is that American values are American interests. American diplomats tend to separate the two and sometimes think that promoting the former can undermine the latter. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton obviously subscribes to this view. After all, this February she famously said that the issue of Chinese human rights cannot be permitted to —interfere— with important topics of discussion with Beijing. The president, for his part, broke the precedent of the last three administrations and refused to see the Dalai Lama during His Holiness's trip to Washington early last month. The administration indicated Obama did not want to rile the Chinese before his visit.*

*"What Obama and Clinton fail to comprehend is that America derives its security because of its values. Peoples around the world support our policies precisely because they share our beliefs. And with the Chinese there is another dimension: Beijing's ruthlessly pragmatic leaders see our failure to press human rights as a sign that we think we are weak. And if they think we are weak, they see little reason to cooperate. So promoting human rights is protecting American security."*

While President Obama could have been more assertive with China, his first year saw a slight but discernable cooling of relations with China's democratic neighbor India. For, as Robert Kagan explained in [World Affairs](#),

*"This accommodation [of rising countries like China] in turn has required a certain distancing from the post-World War II allies. Increasing cooperation with the two great powers would be difficult if not impossible if the United States remained committed to the old alliances which were, after all, originally designed to contain them—NATO in the case of Russia, and, in the case of China, the bilateral alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and the new strategic partnership with India."*

At first, the Asian military dictatorship of Burma saw signs of improved relations with the U.S. under Barack Obama. There was talk of lifting sanctions on the brutal regime of Senior General Than Shwe. However, in October the administration dashed this plan. Benedict Rogers and Joseph Loconte wrote in [The Weekly Standard](#):

*"The Obama administration recently announced the results of its long-awaited Burma policy review. On the face of it the outcome is sound. The United States will maintain existing sanctions on Burma's brutal regime, while attempting a dialogue with the generals. The combination of engagement plus pressure is precisely the package long advocated by Burma's democracy movement and its jailed leader, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi."*

Among the more brazen examples of the administration's muted response to human rights violators one can include the words and actions of special envoy to Sudan, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Scott Gration. Taking a startlingly soft approach to the genocidal regime of Omar al Bashir, Gration said of offering Bashir incentives, "We've got to think about giving out cookies. Kids, countries, they react to gold stars, smiley faces, handshakes, agreements, talk, engagement." On [The Weekly Standard's blog](#), Michael Goldfarb wrote,

*"This from the man who took it upon himself to declare the genocide in Darfur over -- mere 'remnants of genocide' remain he told reporters in June -- at a time when even our push-over Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, was still accusing the Sudanese regime of that precise crime. (Gration would later try and make amends by telling the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that 'Susan Rice is one of my dear friends. There are few women in the world that I would say, 'I love you' to, and Susan is one of them. I love Susan Rice.') Only three months before Gration issued his summary judgment that the genocide in Darfur*

*had come to an end, Sudanese President Omar al Bashir was indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court. Gration is pushing the administration to normalize relations with this indicted war criminal."*

The administration's initial impulse to disregard democratic principles affected policy toward countries in America's own hemisphere. In the [Wall Street Journal](#), Mary Anastasia O'Grady wrote,

*"[T]he administration took off the gloves and sent a message that it would use everything it has to break the neck of the Honduran democracy. Its bullying might work. But it will never be able to brag about what it has done...To recap, the Honduran military in June executed a Supreme Court arrest warrant against Mr. Zelaya for trying to hold a referendum on whether he should be able to run for a second term. Article 239 of the Honduran constitution states that any president who tries for a second term automatically loses the privilege of his office. By insisting that Mr. Zelaya be returned to power, the U.S. is trying to force Honduras to violate its own constitution."*

O'Grady was objecting specifically to the Obama administration's announcement "that visa services for Hondurans are suspended indefinitely, and that some \$135 million in bilateral aid might be cut. that visa services for Hondurans are suspended indefinitely, and that some \$135 million in bilateral aid might be cut" if Zelaya was not reinstated. O'Grady noted:

*"By insisting that Mr. Zelaya be returned to power, the U.S. is trying to force Honduras to violate its own constitution.*

*"It is also asking Hondurans to risk the fate of Venezuela. They know how Venezuela's Hugo Chávez went from being democratically elected the first time, in 1998, to making himself dictator for life. He did it by destroying his country's institutional checks and balances."*

After a succession of diplomatic impasses, President Obama backed away from his initial anti-democratic policy and eventually helped the Honduran government handle Zelaya in accordance with its own constitution.

U.S. allies in Europe suffered as well because of the Obama administration's much vaunted "Reset" of U.S.-Russia relations. After much speculation, the administration made a dramatic departure from America's previous missile defense policy in Europe. FPI's Jamie Fly wrote, in [The Weekly Standard](#),

*"President Obama's decision to cancel plans for U.S. missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic is a knife in the back for those countries. The implications for U.S. security and the transatlantic relationship are profound. Critics rightly note that the sudden announcement Thursday sends a dangerous message to allies, both in Europe and elsewhere, who rely on U.S. security guarantees."*

In addition to the now-familiar anti-democracy flavor of the move, the switch in policy had practical challenges. Fly went on to note that, "The problem for defenders of Obama's decision is that the system they now support is exactly what they accused the Bush system of being--unproven." While the administration vows to house aspects of that future system on Polish and Czech soil, both the efficacy of the proposed technology and the likelihood of Congress's compliance leave the matter an open question.

It was the administration's hope that Russia would become more positively disposed toward American policy, if we removed defense assets from what Moscow believes is its rightful "sphere of influence." Charles Krauthammer wrote the following, in the [Washington Post](#):

*"Surely we got something in return for selling out our friends. Some brilliant secret trade-off to get strong Russian support for stopping Iran from going nuclear before it's too late? Just wait and see, said administration officials, who then gleefully played up an oblique statement by President Dmitry Medvedev a week later as vindication of the missile defense betrayal.*

*The Russian statement was so equivocal that such a claim seemed a ridiculous stretch at the time. Well, Clinton went to Moscow this week to nail down the deal. What did she get?*

*'Russia Not Budging On Iran Sanctions: Clinton Unable to Sway Counterpart.'* Such was *The Washington Post* headline's succinct summary of the debacle.

*Note how thoroughly Clinton was rebuffed. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that 'threats, sanctions and threats of pressure' are 'counterproductive.'* Note: *It's not just sanctions that are worse than useless, but even the threat of mere pressure.*

*It gets worse. Having failed to get any movement from the Russians, Clinton herself moved -- to accommodate the Russian position! Sanctions? What sanctions? 'We are not at that point yet,' she averred."*

It is also worth noting that the President has thus far failed to achieve a follow-on to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Moscow, as promised in July.

As President Obama focused much of his first year in office (and the bulk of the U.S.-Russian relationship) on the issue of global disarmament, at home, the administration proposed in its first budget, a long-term vision for the U.S. defense budget worthy of a second rate European power. [Thomas Donnelly and Gary Schmitt](#) listed the problematic cuts:

*"The termination of the F-22 Raptor program at just 187 aircraft inevitably will call U.S. air supremacy -- the salient feature, since World War II, of the American way of war -- into question... The U.S. Navy will continue to shrink below the fleet size of 313 ships it set only a few years ago... Mr. Gates has promised to 'restructure'*

*the Army's Future Combat Systems (FCS) program, arguing that the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan have called into question the need for new ground combat vehicles... The proposed cuts in space and missile defense programs reflect a retreat in emerging environments that are increasingly critical in modern warfare."*

Donnelly and Schmidt argued that the recommended cuts "are the opening bid in what, if the Obama administration has its way, will be a future U.S. military that is smaller and packs less wallop."

During Obama's first year in the White House, the President has repeatedly sought to strike out on a new, more humble course for American foreign policy. As we see in the examples above, such efforts have been rebuffed at virtually every turn. Charles Krauthammer wrote that "decline is a choice." While Barack Obama has, so far, chosen to steward an American decline, he did envision a manageable descent. But looking at the evidence of the past year, the President seems to have spurred something closer to a mini-freefall.

When faced with the reality of American commitments to fledgling democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan, the President chose to give his commanders on the ground the resources required for victory. The unfortunate realities of international politics will present him with similar dilemmas in the years ahead. It remains unclear whether the fortitude he has shown on Iraq and Afghanistan will be replicated in addressing other issues. The choice between accepting American decline and embracing America's global responsibilities is still his to make.