

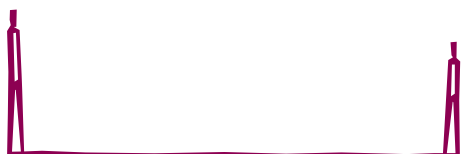
# PRACTICING PROGRESSIVE PRAGMATISM

77

CHARTING BARACK OBAMA'S COURSE  
FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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# PRACTICING PROGRESSIVE PRAGMATISM

CHARTING BARACK OBAMA'S COURSE FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY



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- President Barack Obama's view and handling of foreign policy challenges can be described as pragmatically progressive. His foreign policy blends a realist mindset and pragmatic approach with liberal and, at times, idealistic and far-reaching goals.
- Obama's foreign policy decision-making process is deliberate. This is not always compatible with the expectations of the modern political and media environment.
- Two years into his presidency, Obama has engaged with the five major national security issues he outlined as a candidate, meeting initial success in four of them.
- When faced with unexpected events largely beyond his control, Obama seems not to make snap decisions based on a particular ideology, preferring to take the time to see how events unfold.
- When faced with crises that build up slowly or were previously identified in scenarios, Obama's administration has responded robustly and deliberately.

The Global Security research programme  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs



Camaraderie between the person making the decisions and one who implements them. Obama met U.S. troops at a mess hall during his visit to Afghanistan in March 2010. Photo: Pete Souza / White House Photo.

A little more than two years into his first administration President Barack Obama has faced more foreign policy crises and challenges than almost any of his predecessors. These events have tested his leadership, and given both detractors and supporters numerous opportunities to assess his approach to foreign policy. The crises have also highlighted the breadth of foreign policy experience that President Obama can take advantage of in his administration; Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and Vice-president Joe Biden are particularly noteworthy in this respect.

The ability to steer the ship of state as historical events continually reveal uncharted waters is an important test for any commander. Another indicator of leadership is the ability to describe a vision of the future, and then steer a course towards that future. Consequently, President Obama's foreign and security policy performance must be evaluated both on his ability to engage on the priorities he described while campaigning, and on how he has reacted to unexpected events.

### **Engaging and delivering on campaign promises**

In his "A New Strategy for a New World" speech during the summer of 2008, candidate Obama explained the principles that would guide his foreign policy. He also laid out five explicit national security policy issues he would focus on as president: (1) ending the war in Iraq; (2) emphasizing the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan; (3) securing all nuclear weapons and materials

from terrorists and reducing the number of nuclear weapons; (4) achieving true energy security; and (5) rebuilding alliances and engaging with the rest of the world to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Two years into his presidency, President Obama has engaged with all of these issues, and secured successes in all but energy security.

### ***Ending the war in Iraq***

Of his five priorities, ending the war in Iraq has been achieved with little international public attention. Approximately 100,000 soldiers have been withdrawn during the past two years. In August 2010, Operation Iraqi Freedom was replaced by Operation New Dawn, giving the less than 50,000 American soldiers in Iraq a new mission: to advise, assist and train Iraqi security forces. The pace of withdrawal has been slower (by some 6 months) than the one suggested by candidate Obama, but President Obama has chosen to follow the status of forces agreement (SOFA) signed at the end of the previous administration between the US and Iraqi governments. Clearly the preconditions for withdrawal were set prior to Obama's presidency, but he can assuredly say that he has responsibly ended the war in Iraq.

### ***Focusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan***

Candidate Obama explicitly said he would increase resources and focus on the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Obama has followed through. He has increased diplomatic resources and civilian assistance efforts in the region, though the civilian assistance budget is still less than five per cent of total U.S. outlays in Afghanistan. Obama has also significantly expanded

the scope and increased the number of drone attacks in Pakistan, and made aid to the country conditional on increased counterterrorism cooperation. It is likely, however, that even Obama did not expect that he would more than triple the number of U.S. soldiers deployed to Afghanistan. What the mid- to long-term consequence of the increased resources are may become clearer over the next three years.

### ***Reducing nuclear weapons and securing nuclear material***

Securing nuclear material and reducing the number of nuclear weapons has been a security policy priority for Barack Obama since before he became president. In Prague in April 2009 President Obama articulated a clear vision of his ultimate goal: a world free of nuclear weapons. The signing of the New START Treaty, as well as the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington were small but clear steps towards this goal. In contrast, efforts to permanently dismantle both North Korea's and Iran's nuclear weapons programmes have not been successful. While talks may resume in 2011, the biggest threat to North Korea's programme seems to be the collapse of the dictatorial regime itself. Iran's programme is ongoing but it has been slowed down through a range of actions taken by the United States and others, including additional UN sanctions and effective and targeted cyber attacks.

### ***Achieving energy security***

While the other goals are relatively straightforward to describe, "achieving energy security" was a particularly American and securitized way for candidate Obama to describe a complex set of goals that also included increased renewable energy development while addressing climate change on the side. The 2009 stimulus bill included over \$70 billion for energy efficiency and renewable energy-related work, and car fuel-efficiency standards have been increased, but there is little else Obama can point to in terms of concrete achievements related to energy security. Current domestic politics and instability in the broader Middle East suggest that increased oil and gas exploration around the United States is possible, but little else should be expected in the next two years. A second presidential term may see an increased focus on this issue.

### ***Rebuilding alliances and engaging with the rest of the world***

The persona and being of Barack Obama have been of great importance with regard to the goal of rebuild-

ing alliances and engaging with the rest of the world. Transatlantic relations are significantly better than they were a few years ago. Relations with allies such as Japan and South Korea are strengthening, and relationships with other Asian powers such as India and Indonesia improving. The 'reset' with Russia has been shown to contain more than just eloquent phrases. Obama has skilfully navigated relations with China, perhaps the defining relationship between states in the 21st century. As promised during his campaign, Obama has continued to pressure Iran on its nuclear programme, while also seeking general diplomatic and political reconciliation with the country. In a sign that he wants to minimize distractions, Obama has also downplayed the significance in U.S. foreign policy of foreign leaders such as Hugo Chávez.

Taken together, it is clear that Obama's foreign policy is based on multilateralism, on working with both allies and other countries to address future challenges and mutual interests. The challenge for some countries and organizations will continue to be that Obama's multilateralism is not tied to fixed organizations; concrete achievements are not sacrificed on the altars of dysfunctional diplomatic institutions.

### ***Uncharted waters and 3 a.m. phone calls***

American presidents have for nearly a century recognized that the stature of the United States demands that they respond to crises that occur around the world. Using the metaphor from the 2008 presidential elections, these 3 a.m. phone call crises generally come in two forms. The first type concerns events which have been largely predicted and expected, the timing of which is simply unclear. Rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula are an example of this. The other type of crisis leadership forces a president to sail in uncharted waters, requiring continual adjustments to the course as events unfold. Obama has faced both types of crisis, six of which are briefly addressed below.

President Obama and his inner circle have consistently seen crises as opportunities, and in many instances sought to use such crises as a tool to strengthen formal and informal global governance institutions. For example, the global financial crisis was used to push for changes to global financial governance structures, and in the case of the revolution



The White House situation room, where good arguments win the day. Photo: Pete Souza / White House Photo.

in Libya, President Obama has sought to strengthen the stature of both the United Nations and the International Criminal Court.

### ***Financial and economic crisis***

The financial crisis and economic recession have provided a backdrop to President Obama's entire term as president. As such, it is not a 3 a.m. crisis, though its magnitude merits the sailing in uncharted waters metaphor. Domestically, President Obama has been unable to sufficiently explain why the course he chose was necessary and how successful it has been. On the foreign policy front, President Obama has been criticized by some for not pressuring China to revalue its currency or getting European governments to spend their way out of recession. Clearly no U.S. president has the ability to force such measures to be taken. There is evidence, however, that the Obama administration's non-public efforts at getting China to shoulder more responsibility in developing a healthy and stable international economy are paying off.

### ***Tensions on the Korean Peninsula***

During President Obama's tenure, North Korea has been a continuous source of 3 a.m. phone calls. In a nine-month period North Korea sank the South Korean navy ship Cheonan, shelled the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong and announced important advances in its nuclear weapons programme. The timing of these crises could not be foreseen, but the Obama administration was nonetheless able to consider potential responses to events such as these. Consequently, the administration's responses have been well thought-out: unambiguous support of South Korea and other regional allies, through

diplomatic and military tools. President Obama also used the crises to persuade China that it needed to shoulder more responsibility for clarifying the stakes involved in escalation for the North Korean regime. However, as noted earlier, the administration has not been able to significantly halt North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

### ***Haiti earthquake***

The magnitude of the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the earthquake in Haiti caused the United States to engage in an extensive humanitarian assistance operation. Perhaps because there were few political implications of providing humanitarian assistance in an area it must consider its backyard, where the U.S. was best positioned and had the capability to provide immediate help, the decisions to assist were relatively easy. An interesting point of comparison is the administration's response to the Deep Water Horizon oil spill in the Mexican Gulf, an event which it could not address simply by (re)deploying existing resources (as in Haiti).

### ***Wikileaks***

The impact on U.S. foreign policy of the publication of approximately a quarter of a million U.S. diplomatic documents is ultimately unclear. Much of the information contained in the diplomatic cables was known prior to publication. It is likely that the most significant impacts will be seen in the domestic politics of a number of countries, not in how the United States conducts its foreign policy. If anything, the cables support the argument that specific U.S. foreign policy issues vary by the day, but that core interests remain fairly stable year on year. The Obama administration has made extensive efforts to

staunch the spread of the documents, and made it its policy not to comment on them. However, recognizing that he could not prevent their publication, President Obama is unlikely to have lost much sleep over the cables published to date.

### ***Post-presidential election protests in Iran***

The strength of the post-presidential election protests in Iran in June 2009 bewildered the Obama Administration. Mindful of America's past meddling in Iranian politics, President Obama's initial reaction was total silence. Obama was urged by many to explicitly support the protesters and opposition parties. As the protests expanded and were brutally suppressed, Obama condemned the violence visited upon the protesters, but refused to support any one side. It seems an awareness of history and political realities, coupled with Obama's desire for concrete achievements and the possibility of a negotiated 'grand bargain' with the Iranian leadership prevented him from departing too much from the safety of the metaphorical open sea.

### ***Revolution in Egypt***

The persistence of the anti-regime protest movement in Egypt in early 2011 clearly stunned the Obama administration. During the initial days of the protests, the Obama administration continued the more than 30-year-old policy of supporting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Witnessing the consistent week-long large-scale protests, Obama began to call for an "orderly transition", thus revealing an openness to the argument that authoritarian regimes were not necessary for continued long-term stability in Egypt. As it became increasingly clear that (in Obama's words) the arc of history was bending in favour of the protesters, this position morphed into a call for Mubarak to immediately relinquish power.

In the space of two weeks, the United States radically changed its approach to one of its key allies in the Middle East—causing considerable anguish in Israel and Saudi Arabia. Some critics accused Obama of being too slow to support the protesters, while others argued that his decision not to sanction a violent repression of the protests caused irreparable damage to U.S. interests in the Middle East. It is too soon to tell, but unequivocally, this time Obama let idealism and support for democracy override fluctuating notions of American interests—perhaps ultimately believing that they are more often than not reconcilable.

The administration's responses to the above events suggest that Barack Obama's deliberative decision-making style is somewhat more suited to the predicted 3 a.m. call than sailing uncharted waters. Yet, when called for, Obama has been able to draw on his deep reservoir of knowledge and his multi-cultural perspective to chart a new course for the American ship of state, anchoring it to the right side of history during Egypt's recent revolution.

### **Obama's foreign policy leadership**

An evaluation of President Obama's foreign and security policy during the past two years suggests that although Obama possesses different types of leadership abilities he seems distinctly more comfortable in certain types of crises or foreign policy environments. It also suggests that once decisions are made, he is comfortable delegating authority throughout his administration, in particular trusting Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. These two are the external embodiments of Obama's internal liberal idealist and pragmatic realist. Because of this dynamic, it seems likely that when Clinton and Gates decide to leave their posts, Obama will seek to fill the positions with individuals with similar impulses.

President Obama's ability to work towards achieving each of his five priorities, despite the global economic crisis and a multitude of other unexpected events, speaks of a capacity to focus on stated priorities and strong vision-creating leadership. It suggests that, in the future, Obama will address the issues he highlights as priorities.

When sailing in uncharted waters or faced with 3 a.m. phone call crises, President Obama's foreign policy record is more mixed. Faced with crises where the build-up is slower and escalation foreseeable (such as the Koreas in 2010), the administration has reacted quite adroitly. In situations such as the revolution in Egypt, where fundamental pillars of American foreign policy must potentially be re-evaluated, Obama does not seem to make decisions based on a particular ideology, preferring to take the time to see how events unfold. If an ideological label had to be affixed to the first two years of the Obama administration, it would be progressive pragmatism—seeking progressive (mostly liberal) goals through small, concrete and achievable steps. This is consistent



Obama and China's president Hu Jintao (left) can only wish the world's myriad networks and interconnected challenges could be handled this easily. Photo: Pete Souza / White House Photo.

with both Obama's own writings and the writings of those he has said he looks to for guidance. It is also in stark contrast to the neo-conservative ideology which guided policy-making during the previous administration.

Fundamentally, the idea of a crisis coupled with a media and citizenry that have been conditioned to demand clear, quick responses does not fit a pragmatic, deliberate and occasionally time-consuming approach to foreign policy decision-making. Coupled with a genuine appreciation for the limits of (coercive) power and the resulting policies, this brand of realism has frustrated many both in the United States and abroad. It has also denied his audiences immediate emotionally satisfying and clear responses to crises, and caused some to criticize Obama for lacking crisis-leadership skills. Such criticism misses the point and says more about the critics' frustration with being unable to label President Obama's foreign policy as exclusively driven by idealism or realism.

Certainly, crisis leadership is important, and President Obama has proved to be good at it (though not always good at explaining it), but it is an incomplete measure of leadership. Rather, in matters where individual decisions can carry consequences for decades, leadership must be evaluated based on an ability to discern important issues, and methodically

address them. It is long-term thinking and strategic engagement that are needed when building a solid relationship with China, getting all nuclear powers to engage in negotiations to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, or encouraging the development of democracy in the Middle East. The fact that Obama's foreign policy leadership style blends a realistic, pragmatic and deliberate approach with idealistic and far-reaching goals is not unexpected, especially because while he believes in the values of soaring rhetoric, he values concrete achievements.

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