



From West Point to Brussels – via Warsaw

by Eva Gross

President Obama's commencement address at West Point on 29 May served to outline US foreign policy priorities in his second term. Having announced the future size of the military presence in Afghanistan two days prior, the president's remarks were a symbolic bookend to US engagement in the troubled country, with Obama having used the same location and occasion in 2009 to announce the Afghan 'surge' and the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops.

Beyond confirming the end of US military engagement in Afghanistan by 2016 (the current combat mission itself is to end this year), Obama's speech also focused on the future of US leadership in a changing world. Furthermore, both last week's G7 summit meeting in Brussels and the president's preceding visit to Poland saw Obama put his foreign policy and leadership credo into action in pursuit of a solution to the crisis in Ukraine. At the same time, domestic reactions to the West Point speech highlight constraints which could impact on the president's future room for manoeuvre, particularly where the upcoming mid-term elections are concerned.

Defining US priorities and leadership

Above all, Obama's commencement address spelled out more stringent criteria for deploying the US military in the future, namely "when our people are threatened, when our livelihood is at stake;

or when the security of our allies is in danger." Obama also reconfirmed terrorism as the most direct threat to national security and outlined a new approach to counter extremism in response to the decentralised nature of al-Qaeda. Defining an "arc of militancy" that stretches from the Middle East to the Sahel, Obama used the speech to propose a Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, bankrolled to the tune of \$5 billion and designed to help countries in the Middle East and Africa carry out operations against extremists. Additional foreign policy challenges mentioned included: the nuclear negotiations with Iran, a new global climate change accord, the US reorientation towards Asia, the promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), and the defence of allies in the South and East China Sea.

When it comes to future US engagement, Obama proposed a third way between realism and interventionism, rejecting both isolationism and overreach. The president also insisted on American exceptionalism – and continued leadership – by stating that "America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will." For Obama, leadership consists of three components – and his definition represents a point of departure from more traditional conceptions. Military action is but one part; the other two include efforts to empower third parties – including those in Afghanistan, where the 9,800 troops remaining after 2014 are to assist the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) – and enforcing international order. While strengthening

multilateral institutions means first and foremost buttressing NATO and the UN, it also means promoting other multilateral fora for addressing problems beyond armed conflict – such as cyber security and climate change.

In reaction to the speech, some commentators have expressed concern that the policy challenges listed have not been prioritised within a coherent foreign policy framework. These reactions reflect a continuation of recent trends where the need to deal with a host of defence challenges seems to have overtaken work on a strategic narrative and the stated intention to better align and support the other ‘2Ds’ – that is, diplomacy and development.

While the recently launched 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) outlines US defence priorities, the delay in the planned release of the National Security Strategy (NSC) leaves the foreign policy framework incomplete. Suggestions to update the 2010 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) have so far yielded no results. Consequently, an overarching narrative and indication of where – and how – policy instruments (besides the military) fit within the broader US foreign policy apparatus remains in the making.

Reassuring allies

The US reaction to the diplomatic spat with Russia over Ukraine shows President Obama putting his conception of leadership into practice. The current US approach is three-pronged and centres on economic support for Ukraine; sanctions on Russia as a means to both punish and isolate Moscow; and the reassurance of allies, predominantly through NATO.

Last week’s visit to Europe served all three ends – and focused on multilateral action in concert with US partners, including the EU (just a few of weeks after the official EU-US summit).

While the G7 meeting was intended to consolidate consensus on Russia, including the threat of further sanctions, in Poland Obama sought to reassure America’s allies in central and eastern Europe of US and NATO resolve *vis-à-vis* Russia. Although \$1 billion was pledged in order to boost military reinforcements in Europe, Obama stopped short, however, of a commitment to shift bases to eastern Europe.

Finally, Secretary of Defense Hagel’s ‘muscular’ speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue on 31 May served as an Asia-Pacific complement to the

president’s stance on Russia – in particular with regard to China and what Hagel bluntly termed its “destabilising, unilateral actions asserting its claims in the South China Sea.”

Confronting domestic constraints

Current criticism of the president is somewhat surprising given that, in foreign policy terms, Obama has clearly accomplished an overriding goal of his administration that has widespread domestic support: to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This has also been accompanied by a turn away from state-building and the long-term deployment of military forces in pursuit of this objective. The president’s handling of foreign policy had previously not been particularly contested – with Obama having prioritised up until now economic and social agendas: the first by necessity, due to the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, and the second by choice.

Yet domestic debates are also bringing to the fore an increasing contradiction in US foreign policy, where military disengagement abroad coexists with deep concern over the perceived loss of US power and international standing. Although broadly supported by players across the political spectrum, Obama’s reluctance to revert to Cold War language on Russia and, even more so, his decision not to intervene militarily in Syria have often been interpreted as wavering (or even weakness) on his part. This often leads to frustration, recently epitomised by his own off-the-record definition of his foreign policy as “don’t do stupid shit.”

It is in this increasingly antagonistic domestic setting that foreign policy has become the subject of partisan conflicts. Budget wars, the attack on the US embassy in Benghazi and the recent controversy over the exchange of prisoners with the Taliban are all being deployed in order to discredit the Obama administration’s handling of foreign policy. And when it comes to climate change, Obama will have to resort to using executive powers to move around Congressional blockades.

While Obama prepares his legacy, the mid-term elections in November – where Republicans could win back the Senate and thereby control Congress – risk further curtailing the president’s room for manoeuvre. And, on the horizon, a bitter fight over a potential and expected presidential bid by Hillary Clinton is also looming.

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