

Is Obama's Foreign Policy Different From George W. Bush's?

Written by Peter Feaver and Ionut Popescu

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PETER FEAVER AND IONUT POPESCU, AUG 3 2012

Candidates for President regularly campaign on the premise that the incumbent has done everything wrong and on the promise that they will do things very differently if elected. Then, once elected, many Presidents find themselves delivering a foreign policy that has more continuity than change. Few Presidents have followed this pattern as dramatically as has President Obama. The Obama 2008 campaign was built entirely around the theme of change and especially around the repudiation of the foreign policy of his predecessor, George W. Bush. The Obama Administration has kept the same campaign rhetoric throughout, but at the level of policy and grand strategy, there has been a substantial degree of continuity. Of course, there have also been areas of change, and some of those are significant. But the continuity is more striking and, importantly, the continuity has mostly worked for Obama, certainly more so than have any changes. Obama's foreign policy successes came primarily when he followed policies inherited from the Bush Administration, while his failures came when he attempted to implement his own initiatives.

Grand Strategy Design

Grand strategy refers to the collection of plans and policies by which the leadership of the United States mobilizes and deploys the country's resources and capabilities, both military and non-military, to achieve its national goals. Grand strategy articulations present the Administration's "theory of the case:" what is America's role in the world, what threatens that role, and what we should do about it. For instance, should America lead as the sole superpower, or are we constrained to act as just one among many great powers?

At this level of analysis, the Obama design spelled out in the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) is remarkably similar to Bush's 2006 NSS. Both NSS's emphasize American leadership. This was an important theme of Bush's NSS. Effective action depended on American leadership – "the international community is most engaged in such action when the United States leads." Obama's NSS similarly emphasizes America's "global leadership" and "steering those currents [of international cooperation] in the direction of liberty and justice" and "shap[ing] and international order" because "global security depends upon strong and responsible American leadership."

Leadership goes beyond seeing the world as it is and includes transforming the world according to America's interests and values or, as Obama puts it: "In the past, the United States has thrived when both our nation and our national security policy have adapted to shape change instead of being shaped by it." Even the extra focus on rebuilding America at home (what the NSS deems "renewal") is justified not merely as an end in itself (which it surely is) but also as a means to another end of expanding America's global influence.

Similarly, President Bush's NSS emphasized effective, action-oriented multilateralism to address the challenges of the day: to "strengthen alliances to defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends" and to "develop agendas for cooperative action with the other main centers of global power." Obama's NSS emphasizes "comprehensive engagement" built on the "cornerstone" of our traditional allies but expanding outwards to include "more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence."

Moving from an analysis of the grand strategic plans to their implementation on specific policy issues, the similarities

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continue to be fairly pronounced, although some differences are worth highlighting.

Policy Areas of Continuity

Obama's greatest successes in foreign policy have come in domains where he continued and expanded on the policies inherited from his predecessor. Obama dropped the "Global War on Terror" label, but proceeded on the same trail blazed by Bush when it came to the legal reasoning underpinning it (including an expansive view of presidential power and detention policies), to unilateral drone strikes wherever terrorists are found, or to the use of Special Forces raids to target high-value individuals. The achievements the Obama Administration is rightly most proud of — the elimination of a solid number of high-level al-Qaeda officials, including of course Bin Laden — are a direct result of continuing the War on Terror along this aggressive path.

The same pattern of continuity yielding positive outcomes holds for other important policy areas. On Afghanistan, Obama's adoption of a surge in the number troops to allow for a better resourced counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban was the same option recommended by the Bush-era strategy reviews of 2008. In Asia-Pacific, the geopolitical balancing against China by increasing US naval presence in the area and strengthening relations with regional power such as India, also represents a continuation of Bush's regional strategy in that part of the world.

Lastly, on international trade issues, rather than follow his protectionist campaign promise to renegotiate NAFTA, the Obama administration not only left NAFTA intact, but successfully completed (after a several year delay) the two Free Trade Agreements (with South Korea and Colombia) negotiated during Bush's tenure.

Another great success touted by the President, "ending" the war in Iraq, also represents a continuation of the phased withdrawal strategy negotiated by the Bush Administration in the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq. However, as is the case on some other important issues, here some smaller dimensions of change might eclipse in importance the larger dimensions of continuity. Obama abandoned the longer-range plan for Iraq that guided the 2008 agreement: namely negotiating a follow-on Status of Forces Agreement that would allow for a small but significant stay-behind force to help secure a stable peace well past the 2011 deadline. Whether Obama's change will lead to greater success remains to be seen.

The two areas of continuity where the results have been less than positive for the Obama administration have been the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and the Six-Party framework approach to North Korea's nuclear program. On these policies, the relatively ineffective policies of the Bush administration were continued, with the same poor results. Whether a different approach would work better hard to say given the difficulty of addressing these problems, but what is clear is that Obama did not deviate significantly from the Bush administration on either of them.

Policy Areas of Discontinuity

In the policy areas where Obama made more pronounced course changes from the previous administration, the results have been rather unsatisfactory, leading in some circumstances to a reverse back to the Bush position after the new approach proved unworkable or unsuccessful.

One of the most illustrative examples of this dynamic was Obama's failed effort to close Guantanamo Bay and to conduct the trials of detainees in civil rather than military courts. Despite the prominence of that issue in the campaign and during the first year of the administration, the President eventually left most of the legal framework he inherited from Bush in place.

Obama's pressure on Israel on the settlement issue, escalating the preconditions for future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, were another change of US policy that Obama had to retreat from when the preconditions resulted in a paralyzed peace process.

The Iran policy went through a similar process of failed efforts at a change of course followed by backtracking. The administration relaxed some of the pressure on Tehran in June 2009 in the hopes of preserving a direct negotiation

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channel. Then Obama left unexploited the opportunity to rally the international community in favor of harsher sanctions in September 2009 when Western intelligence agencies revealed a covert uranium enrichment facility near Qom. The conciliatory approach adopted early on by Obama did not produce the desired results, and as time went on the administration reversed back to the Bush era policies of pushing for tougher sanctions while keeping talk of a military option alive.

In one of the most explicit changes from the Bush administration, Obama claimed to have achieved a "reset" in relations with Russia. To achieve this, the administration canceled the deployment of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, alienating local allies in the hope of improving relations with Russia, and made other concessions to Russian interests. However, as the recent Russian veto on the Syria resolution showed, the US concessions have not persuaded the Russians to be more amenable to American concerns across the board. Moreover, the reemergence of Putin as the unrivaled Russian leader has called into question the significant investment Obama made in his personal ties to Medvedev. It appears increasingly as if the "reset" was a failure. Obama also made early important concessions to China in the realm of human rights, when the US eased off its pressure on Beijing in the hope of developing a closer partnership — a "G-2" — aimed at stabilizing the global economy. Such a partnership failed to materialize, as the Chinese government continued to be more interested in protecting its narrow national interest rather than taking a global leadership role along with the US in managing the global economy.

One last area where Obama attempted an important change was on the issue of climate change. Despite his administration's efforts to achieve a binding international treaty by the time of the Copenhagen summit in 2009, such an accord never materialized and thus the administration's hopes for achieving real progress on climate change were dealt a very hard blow.

"Leading from behind" in Libya is the one policy area where the Obama administration could tentatively claim some success from following a strategy different than what his predecessor might have pursued. The US let other countries take the lead in removing Qaddafi, thus limiting the costs to the US, but also limiting the influence Washington ultimately will have in the final outcome in Libya. To the extent that the outcome will be a positive one, Obama could claim that his own approach worked at a lower costs than the more direct involvement in a leadership capacity favored by Bush. But it is too soon to say whether the long-term benefits of the Libyan operation will live up to expectations.

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This article is based in part on ideas first presented by Peter Feaver in the following sources:

- 1) Obama's National Security Strategy: real change or just 'Bush Lite?'
- 2) Iranian containment: Refocusing the argument
- 3) Giving Obama credit — when he's followed Bush's footsteps

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