

Review - The Global Obama: Crossroads of Leadership in the 21st Century

Written by Yannis Stivachtis

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The Global Obama: Crossroads of Leadership in the 21st Century
Edited by Dinesh Sharma and Uwe P. Gielen
London: Routledge, 2014. pp. 340.

During the Presidency of George W. Bush Jr., one of the major themes investigated in relation to the impact of the U.S. foreign policy on public and government perceptions around the world was the rise of anti-Americanism in world affairs. Peter Katzenstein's and Robert O. Keohane's edited volume entitled *Anti-Americanisms in World Affairs* constitutes the most comprehensive effort to examine the phenomenon of anti-Americanism in world politics. The outcome of this scholarly investigation pointed out that as a result of President Bush's foreign policy the image of the United States abroad was severely damaged.

The election of Barak Obama, the first black president in the history of the United States, in conjunction with his origins and views on a range of important domestic and international issues created an expectation around the world that U.S. foreign policy orientation and practices will change. In addition, there was an expectation that this change will lead to a more positive image of the United States abroad.

The Global Obama: Crossroads of Leadership in the 21st Century, the completion of which coincided with the end of President Obama's first term in the White House, performs the invaluable scholarly task of exploring President Obama's image in various countries and world regions. Despite its title, the book in question could easily be related to the study of U.S. foreign policy and therefore it could be of great interest to students and scholars in the field of international relations, in general, and foreign policy in particular. However, the approach of this book is very much different from other books that have sought to examine President Obama's foreign policy, such as Michelle Bentley's and Jack Holland's, *Obama's Foreign Policy* and Inderjeet Parmar's and Linda Miller's, *Obama and the World*.

This book began as a companion volume to *Barack Obama in Hawai'i and Indonesia: The Making of a Global President* that was edited by Dinesh Sharma and published in 2012. While researching about the earlier book, which entailed extensive travel to various world regions, Dinesh Sharma observed the existence of varied and diverse perceptions about President Obama as a leader. As a result, the editors of the present volume have sought to explore the stark contrast between President Obama's popularity abroad and his suboptimal ratings at home. Consequently, the main purpose of the volume under review has been to investigate the causes of the inverse correlation between President Obama's public image at home and that abroad. President Obama's global leadership qualities and position and how he is being perceived and judged around the world constitute the central and intertwined themes of this volume.

To address the book's central question, the editors assembled a group of contributors whose main task was to assess President Obama as a global leader in the context of his policies toward their country or region in which they reside. The volume contributors cover all five continents and more than twenty countries. This research team includes leadership experts, international relations scholars, journalists, business analysts, and internationally oriented sociologists, psychologists, and economists. Thus the book is multidisciplinary in nature as well as global in scope to

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better elucidate the multifaceted aspects of President Obama's worldwide image and influence. It is important to note that the volume contributors represent a broad range of political views and differ considerably in their assessment of the Obama's Administration achievements.

The book's methodology is broadly social sciences based and has relied extensively on the skills and knowledge of local journalists and reporters. It is worth noting that the book's final part relies extensively on interviews with President Obama's siblings to make the case that Obama is indeed a 'global president' to help usher in an emerging global century.

Following a wide-ranging introduction and several chapters focusing and analyzing President Obama's leadership qualities, the volume proceeds to examine his worldwide image in five sections that cover major regions of the world, such as Africa, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. The book's final section is future oriented and focuses on America's evolving Pacific Century.

The contributors to this volume have raised a set of broad questions, such as what leadership qualities does Barack Obama bring to the White House? How does the world outside the United States see him? Have their perceptions shifted over time? Why have his approval ratings in many countries been much higher than those in the United States? Is he an advocate of a multipolar world that is witnessing the rise of Asia and the Pacific region against the backdrop of European decline and the emergence of a post-American world? Or would President Obama become the advocate of a new American century, with the United States remaining as the world's singular dominant superpower? Will President Obama's Administration help the American dream endure for yet another century in the face of steadily shifting of geopolitical power structures around the world?

To better assess how successful Obama and his administration have been in preserving American leadership in a rapidly changing world and what people in various world regions and individual countries think of him and his leadership, one needs to do so in reference to the goals that President Obama himself set. As the editors correctly point out, when President Obama began his first term, he did so with two ambitious goals in mind. On the international level, he hoped to reposition the United States in an increasingly multipolar and intertwined world by adopting more multilateral and nuanced geopolitical strategies and diplomatic tactics than those employed by President George W. Bush Jr. Indeed, the contributors to this volume discuss how successful or not President Obama has been in these efforts. President Obama has also stated that America must put its own house in order by improving its deteriorating infrastructure, mediocre educational system at the primary and secondary school levels, general economic competitiveness, and scientific creativity. His efforts at accomplishing this second set of goals have met with variable success, but they are not the main focus of discussion in this book. Moreover, the volume's contributors have paid only limited attention to the not very successful efforts of the Obama Administration to address environmental issues both at home and abroad, such as the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.

The volume findings indicate that the negative effects of the foreign policy of President George W. Bush Jr. in conjunction with President Obama's widely accepted views on a range of issues at the international level created an expectation that Obama's foreign policy orientation and practices will differ fundamentally from those of his predecessor. As a result, the image of the United States abroad started to improve significantly. However, as the time progressed and the Obama Administration could not effectively address a number of international issues, as well as satisfy the wishes and interests of certain governments, his image abroad, and as an extension that of the United States started declining. This trend appeared to continue despite his decision to withdraw militarily from Iraq and Afghanistan and his opening to the Muslim world. Such a finding has come to support the views of those who argue that the American Presidents may change but the US policy will remain almost the same.

Generally speaking, the contributors show that President Obama remains popular in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Europe, and to varying degrees in a good many parts of Asia. Although President Obama has not done that much for Africa, due to his origins most Africans continue to have positive attitudes toward him because they see him as almost one of their own. In Latin America, he is widely viewed as an improvement over his predecessor particularly because he supports and understands immigrants from Latin America better while deemphasizing unilateral American political and economic dominance in the region. According to the reporting in this volume, many

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Europeans respond warmly to Obama's conciliatory idealism while seeing him as one who embodies the American dream in a form entirely suitable to the emerging multiracial world. However, it seems that the WikiLeaks and the American surveillance of European leaders' communication systems has affected negatively President Obama's image in Western Europe. On the other hand, the Ukrainian crisis and American support and guarantees for the security and territorial integrity of the Baltic states have contributed to President Obama's positive image in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, it is expected that the deterioration of the Russian-American relations has affected his image in Russia.

In contrast to Africa and the Latin America, the contributors to this volume report that the Muslim people of the Middle East and North Africa view President Obama as a typical American leader unsympathetic to their Islamic/political/nationalistic goals while ignoring the suffering of the Palestinian people. Indeed, President Obama's efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been unsuccessful from the very beginning of his presidency. It seems that the U.S approach and management of the recent Israeli-Palestinian crisis has added to this 'unsympathetic' image of President Obama. This observation is of great importance given the goal and initial efforts of the Obama Administration to alter America's image in the Middle East.

According to the volume's analysis, the Asia-Pacific will be a major test of Obama's leadership capabilities and his ability to engage in effective long-term global planning. Indeed, as President Obama's second term unfolds, the crucial relationship between the United States and China; the security situation on the Korean Peninsula; the unstable political and economic conditions in Pakistan; the Iranian challenge to the United States, Israel and some of its neighbors; the civil war in Syria and the fight against ISIS/ISIL are only some of the Asian flashpoints that have the potential of destabilizing international peace and stability as well as challenge some of the Obama Administration's long-term plans.

In an increasingly multipolar and economically competitive and interdependent world in which momentum is shifting from ailing Europe toward Asia and the global south, Obama's global leadership will certainly be tested. Up to now, his foreign policy has for the most part been pursuing pragmatic goals rather than living up to his activist vision and the idealistic image that his worldwide audience had formed of him in the beginning of his presidency. Although he has repeatedly promised that he will help to "bend the long arc of history toward justice" he has only partially succeeded in realizing this goal; a fact that has been highlighted by several contributors to this volume. Therefore, for the remainder of his second term, the crucial question remains: can President Obama live up to his own words or will go down in history as a leader who acted more like a pragmatic politician and less of a worldwide, effective champion of justice and human progress?

It seems likely that President Obama will remain more successful on the global stage than at home where a divided and at times dysfunctional Congress is likely to prevent the implementation of many of his plans. Although at the beginning of his second term the American people were split neatly in half over their assessment of Obama's achievements as a president, a considerable drop in his recent approval rates reflect the public's increasing dissatisfaction with his performance at home.

This book was written in the eve of President Obama's re-election. Thus the questions raised in this book do not necessarily draw a final conclusion but rather constitute, as the editors suggest, working hypotheses and specific lines of inquiry to be followed up over time. These are issues that the editors plan to revisit in future analysis.

This is the first book of its kind. No other volume has analyzed Obama's leadership within the broader context of globalization in different parts of the world. By presenting an integrated view of global perceptions, this book addresses strategic issues concerning America's future while building a global understanding of the Obama Presidency that digs deeper than regular opinion surveys do. The editors of this volume have done a fantastic job in putting together the various contributions thereby providing the reader with a comprehensive coverage of the chosen theme and a book where its individual parts tie up very well together. The volume contributors have also done an excellent job in responding to the set of questions advanced by the editors.

This volume is well-structured, well-written, well-argued and well-documented. It would be useful to political scientists

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interested in examining the impact of American Presidency on domestic and international affairs but also to scholars and practitioners interested in international politics and U.S. foreign policy. Its written style makes the book suitable for inclusion in different levels of undergraduate and graduate courses on global, regional and geopolitical issues. Last, but not least the book is accessible to the general public and it can easily be read by anyone interested in politics and global affairs.

About the author:

Yannis A. Stivachtis is Associate Professor of Political Science at Virginia Tech. His research interests include the evolution of international society, the study of regional international society, conditionality and international order, international society and the civilizing process, and European international society and global order. His current professional service includes: Head of the English School section (ENGSS) of the International Studies Association (ISA) and Director of the Social Sciences Research Division of the Athens Institute of Education and Research (ATINER). He is the editor of the *Athens Journal of Social Sciences* and co-editor of the *Critical European Studies* book series published by Routledge/Taylor & Francis. His most recent publications include: *Interrogating Regional International Societies*, *Questioning Global International Society* (editor, Global Discourse 2015); *Europe after Enlargement* (co-editor, London: Routledge 2014); *Europe and the World: The English School Meets Post-colonialism* (editor, *Review of European Studies* 2012); *The European Union and Peacebuilding* (co-editor, *Review of European Studies*, 2013).