

FEATURE

Grading Obama's Foreign Policy

Nine experts rate the president's performance so far.

BY LOIS FARROW PARSHLEY

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Robert Kagan:

On the accomplishment side of the ledger, credit Barack Obama with a very smart policy in Asia. By taking advantage of China overplaying its hand in the South China Sea and generally unnerving most of the region, the Obama administration has reconfirmed the central role of the United States in East Asia. The opening of a new base in Australia is a powerful symbol of America's enduring strategic presence in the region. The opening with Burma obviously has both strategic motives and strategic implications.

He also has a fairly good record in responding to the Arab Awakening. The Obama administration has fortunately ignored the "realists'" call for standing by the collapsing dictatorships in the Middle East. (How people can call themselves "realists" when advocating such hopelessly unrealistic policies is a source of wonderment.) In Egypt, especially, while the reaction to events has sometimes been slow, the administration has generally moved in the right direction. Obama deserves particular credit for not joining in the general "realist" chorus. Obama deserves particular credit for not joining in the general "realist" chorus. Obama deserves particular credit for not joining in the general "realist" chorus.

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MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD. The operation in international pressure on Basha al-Assad the United States will have to do more.

More generally, Obama has made steady treating it like a dirty word in its first year to a pro-democracy posture not only in the Middle East. Given that the political evolution of countries in the region is bearing on the international strategic situation and on the nature of world order in the coming years, this has been an eminently "realistic" approach.

As for setbacks, topping the list is Obama's failure to work out an agreement with Iraq to maintain a U.S. troop presence beyond the end of 2011. This has been a disaster and may prove to be one of the gravest errors of Obama's first term, for which either he or his successor will pay a high price. If Iraq unravels into sectarian warfare, it could easily suck other regional powers into the conflict — especially Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Just as importantly, it would set back democratic progress in the region. Iraq is almost as much an anchor in the Arab world as Egypt. The decision to give up on the admittedly difficult negotiations with the Iraqis was clearly motivated by White House's desire to run on "ending" the war in Iraq. This was as unnecessary as it was unwise.

The decision to allow deep cuts in defense spending — rather than addressing entitlements — is equally irresponsible. Here the Obama administration and Congress are both to blame. But the Obama team has compounded the problem by elaborating a budget-driven defense strategy that is not commensurate with American strategic goals and interests. It is ironic that Obama is adopting Donald Rumsfeld's defense strategy — high tech, light footprint. We will find, as we did in the Bush years, the Clinton years, and in many previous decades, that drones and

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missiles can only go so far in preserving American interests. If not reversed, the deep cuts looming in defense will go a long way to undermining the U.S. position in the world. They will even undercut the Obama administration's efforts to make the United States a more reliable player in Asia, despite its unconvincing protestations to the contrary.

Robert Kagan is senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. His new book, [The World America Made](#), will be published next month.

Anne-Marie Slaughter:

Overall, Barack Obama has had a very good run on foreign policy, aided by his superstar secretary of state.

His greatest accomplishments are the successful intervention in Libya under the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine; the institutionalization of the U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific through membership in the East Asia Summit and much more active regional diplomacy; the creation of the G-20 as a permanent leaders' forum, thereby broadening the circles of decision to include many non-Western powers; the killing of Osama bin Laden and the decimation of al Qaeda; the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and a firm commitment to withdraw from Afghanistan; the elevation of development (including food security, global health, climate change issues, and economic growth) as a much bigger part of U.S. foreign policy; the restoration of trade as a meaningful foreign-policy tool by passing three trade agreements and setting up a framework for trans-Pacific free trade; the global defense of Internet freedom (assuming SOPA/PIPA do not pass in anything like their current form) and the transformation of the highly politicized debate about degrees of democratization into degrees of transparency, accountability, and citizen participation through the [Open Government Partnership](#).

Running through all these successes is a larger meta-achievement: The president has repositioned the United States to be a far more nimble, flexible, responsive and effective leader in world affairs. He is systematically divesting the burdens that weigh us down (two major wars), expanding the range of tools at our disposal (diplomatic, economic, developmental, environmental, and energy — e.g. a new energy bureau at the State Department), and reorganizing and consolidating the parts that work (see his proposal for the Commerce Department and associated small agencies and the reorganization taking place at State).

The administration has also worked to establish and strengthen regional and global institutions that allow the United States to leverage its own efforts and to cooperate much more efficiently with others. Reinforcing a norm of global and regional responsibility for following international rules allows the United States to broker and support coalitions of nations in which other, more directly involved regional powers take the lead — not only in Libya, but also with respect to France in the Ivory Coast, Turkey in Syria, the African Union in Somalia, and ASEAN nations in Southeast Asia. Call it the private equity approach to American foreign policy: nimble, flexible, adaptable, and responsive are all essential characteristics for success in the continually accelerating, complex system we call international affairs.

Obama's biggest failure has been the management of Israel — not the failure to achieve a peace agreement, which is a serial failure on the part of many presidents — but in framing the entire issue in such a way that once the United States had demanded an end to the settlements and Israel refused, any subsequent U.S. accommodation of Israel looks like capitulation to the very Muslim world that Obama set out to court. As a result, it is still not clear that Obama will accomplish one of his own top goals: resetting the U.S. relationship with the Muslim communities around the world.

He has also failed to establish a consistent strategy for Pakistan, alternating between embrace and embarrassment in ways that often make our policy as inconsistent and frustrating as the Pakistanis are themselves. But at the moment it's hard to figure out even what our stated policy is, much less to implement it.

A third failure is harder to discern but potentially very damaging over the long term. In pivoting to Asia so publicly, without a counterbalancing emphasis on the enduring and indispensable U.S. partnership with Europe, he has created an opportunity for China to re-establish itself as the pivot power between the U.S. and Europe and once again become the Middle Kingdom. China and Europe are already each other's largest trading partners. Now, individual European countries such as Britain, Denmark, and Germany are actively courting Chinese investment and offering access to strategic minerals. China may yet become a principal banker for the eurozone (which is unlikely to give China direct leverage over European leaders any more than Chinese holdings of U.S. debt gives them leverage over us, but could open the door further to economic and even political relationships that could complicate U.S. diplomacy). It would have been far better to have pivoted toward Asia from a position of trans-Atlantic strength, deepening and intensifying ties across multiple continents throughout the Atlantic Basin.

Finally, for all of Obama's success using drones, the ultimate light, nimble and adaptable weapon, many of the precedents the United States setting with drone attacks will come back to haunt us. Now is the time to begin to develop an international consensus around rules governing drones and other means of individualized 21st-century warfare. Exulting in victory over the killing of individual terrorist suspects may feel good, but this is precisely the issue on which we need less celebration and more of the cool, cerebral analysis that the president is known for.

Anna Maria Slaughter is the Post-Communist Studies University Professor of Politics and

AMIE-MARIE DIAUGHERI IS THE BEN G. KEISLER '00 UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR OF POLICS and International Affairs at Princeton University. She served as director of Policy Planning at the U.S. State Department from 2009-2011.

Joseph Cirincione:

Barack Obama came out early and strong on nuclear policy, with initiatives that worked. A new treaty cut U.S. and Russian arsenals and restored critical, mutual inspections. Scores of nations agreed to lock up and even eliminate uranium and plutonium that terrorists could use to build weapons. Dozens of countries cooperated to pressure Iran and North Korea, slowing the nuclear programs of both. All strengthened U.S. national security.

But the Iranian and North Korean programs have not stopped; the materials are not yet secured; and U.S. and Russian arsenals still number in the thousands, with no new agreement in sight. The combination of competing crises, a resistant bureaucracy, political opposition, and reluctant partners has slowed progress to a crawl.

Obama's best chance to restore momentum is through a series of options the Pentagon has prepared on nuclear policy. He could choose the more ambitious path, cutting requirements to reduce Russia to rubble and, in so doing, save billions by cutting obsolete nuclear programs and strengthen his arguments against new states getting these weapons. Or he could punt, squandering his credibility, weakening his alliances, and increasing nuclear dangers.

It's his call.

Joseph Cirincione is president of Ploughshares Fund.

Danielle Pletka:

Any short analysis of Barack Obama's successes and failures in foreign policy must necessarily be incomplete. Is it enough to weigh his undeniable good judgment in ordering Navy SEALs to take out Osama bin Laden against his vacillation when faced with the Arab Spring? His willingness to face reality vis-à-vis Iran versus his paralyzing missteps in promoting Israeli-Palestinian dialogue? Surely not.

But at the heart of what must, by the standards the president set for himself, be judged a failure, is what seems to be Obama's worst sin: The president's foreign policy lacks a guiding set of principles. Why surge troops into Afghanistan only to draw them down before the mission is complete? Why condemn Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya for his crimes against his own people and remain almost indifferent to the same crimes when committed by Bashar al-Assad in Syria? Why knock off a dozen al Qaeda terrorists from the air, and release another group from Guantánamo?

The answer, of course, is politics. Politics matters to any sane politician; but when politics suffers no competition from principle, the nation's foreign policy is rudderless. It is why our allies mistrust us, our adversaries underestimate us, and why we no longer seek to shape a better world, but instead to retreat from it.

Danielle Pletka is vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

Aaron David Miller:

"Life's about learning," Crosby, Stills, and Nash sang in one of their better songs. Barack Obama has surely learned a lot of about foreign policy over the last 3 years, and nowhere more so than the Middle East.

Wrongly convinced that antipathy toward his predecessor and his own powerful persona would position him well to transform the trajectory of the nation's foreign policy, he quickly learned the limits of engagement and the challenges of the cruel and unforgiving world he inherited.

Indeed, in many ways Obama has morphed into a less reckless and certainly less ideological version of Bush 43 in the final years of his presidency: surging in Afghanistan, toughening policy toward Iran (and Syria), whacking more bad guys with predator drones in his first year than his predecessor did in his first term, and keeping the Guantánamo prison open.

The first president to inherit a shooting war in 40 years, Obama actually inherited two: He has been a wartime president from the get-go, and, like Woodrow Wilson, is the only other sitting American president with a war and a Nobel Peace Prize, however unearned. One reason the Republicans now have such a hard time attacking him on foreign policy is that the public knows his record on national security has been tough and effective enough.

Obama has been competent on foreign policy, with no spectacular achievements (save killing Osama) nor any galactic failures. And he's stayed out of trouble (see: his light-footprint Libya intervention). Obama has wisely gotten out of Iraq and unwisely gotten deeper into another quagmire in Afghanistan, where victory will sadly be determined not by whether we can win, but by when can we leave. On Iran, he deserves credit for toughening sanctions, but in the cruelest of twists, may still end up being the American president on whose watch Iran gets the bomb. His policy toward the Arab-Israeli issue is marked by more enthusiasm than clear-headed thinking, and it shows.

On balance, Obama has been credible and able in foreign policy, but neither the

brilliant foreign transformer nor transactional negotiator and crisis manager he wanted to be. He shouldn't take it personally; it's a cruel world out there.

Aaron David Miller is public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. His new book, Can America Have Another Great President?, will be published by Random House in 2012.

Ted Galen Carpenter:

President Obama has amassed a decidedly mixed record on foreign policy. He can boast of several worthwhile achievements during his first 3 years. He fulfilled the commitment to withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011, repaired much of the damage that the Bush administration had caused to America's relationship with the European democracies, and put the United States — at least rhetorically — on the right side of history regarding the Arab Awakening. His campaign to eliminate al Qaeda's leadership achieved numerous successes, most notably the killing of Osama Bin Laden. Relations with Russia, which had become quite tense during the Bush years, modestly improved.

Unfortunately, there were also major mistakes and disappointments. His worst blunder was the decision to expand the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and intensify the futile nation-building mission in that pre-industrial, tribal society. Obama's policy toward Iran, despite an encouraging initial effort to establish a meaningful dialogue with Tehran, has resumed the same counterproductive, confrontational path of his predecessors. Tensions with Pakistan have risen sharply, as have tensions in America's most important relationship, with China. The Obama administration has also been slow to respond constructively to the mounting drug violence next door in Mexico, continuing instead to pursue a failed prohibitionist policy that enriches the drug cartels.

Finally, Obama has shown little inclination to adjust the overall U.S. security strategy to reflect America's increasingly precarious financial position. The president seems as willing as his predecessors to tolerate — indeed, encourage — U.S. allies to free-ride on Washington's security efforts. Even more disappointing, there has been little apparent recognition that U.S. power is limited and that there is an urgent need to set priorities and prune less essential commitments. That is perhaps the biggest failure of Obama's foreign policy thus far.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs.

Jamie Fly:

As Barack Obama seeks reelection, he will likely tout the country's counterterrorism successes under his watch and, in a sop to his base, his ending of the war in Iraq and his efforts to wind down the war in Afghanistan. Although voters in 2012 will be focused primarily on the state of the economy, they should consider who is best suited to defend the country and advance America's interests as commander chief when choosing whether to reelect Obama or bring in a new president.

The Obama administration does have achievements to point to in the war against al Qaeda and affiliated groups — the killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. Navy SEALs chief among them. But the war on terror must remain a focus for the next president, whoever it is. Obama, by deemphasizing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in favor of deniable covert efforts, has put the country at risk of being drawn back into both theaters because of his unwillingness to finish the job begun by his predecessor.

So too is the situation with rogue regimes that threaten America and its allies. The West's confrontation with Iran is nearing a critical juncture as Iran approaches a

nuclear weapons capability. Syria, Iran's closest ally, is wracked by what many observers now describe as a civil war. The broader Middle East is in turmoil in the wake of last year's momentous developments. North Korea, under the new leadership of Kim Jong Un, still challenges the stability of East Asia.

Meanwhile, rising and resurgent powers such as China and Russia continue to undermine American interests. Obama has rightfully begun to devote more American diplomatic and military attention to Asia to deal with China's rise, but has pursued a wrongheaded "reset" policy with Russia that does not reflect the true nature of the Russian government, now facing its own popular uprising. On each of these issues, the Obama administration has refused to take assertive action, instead managing on the margins.

In his first three years in office, Obama has made several correct tactical decisions, but he seems to lack an appreciation of America's unique role in the world and a coherent vision for the use of U.S. power and influence. What the country needs from its next president is a leader who can shape world events rather than be shaped by them. There is little to indicate that this is Barack Obama's interest or aptitude.

Jamie M. Fly is executive director of the Foreign Policy Initiative.

Heather Hurlburt:

Barack Obama's list of achievements on foreign policy and national security is long, but also diffuse. Many are good starts on works in progress. The misses, while smaller, are specific and painful.

Achievements:

1. Winding down the Bush wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

2. Making counterterrorism quieter and more successful — decimating al Qaeda central, including Osama bin Laden.
3. Activating the G-20 and using it to keep the world economy out of recession in 2009.
4. Resetting relations with Russia — even as we fight in public, cooperation continues on Afghanistan overflights, nuclear arms control and disarmament, and getting Russia into the WTO.
5. Steadying relations with Asia — not just the much-ballyhooed "pivot" but specifically building a new confidence among our core Asian allies — Australia, Japan, South Korea — while managing a very challenging period with China and making innovative moves in Burma and economic policy.

6. Moving U.S. military strategy and funding into the post-post-9/11 era with a considered strategic refocusing, a reconsideration of the role and scope of U.S. nuclear and ground forces, while keeping our promises to veterans, funding and defending the New GI bill, and undertaking the most significant Veterans' Administration reforms in a generation.
7. Rebuilding U.S. multilateral credibility, at the United Nations and elsewhere.
8. South Sudanese independence, which went off relatively peacefully in no small part due to Obama and U.N. ambassador Susan Rice's intervention at the U.N. last fall.

9. Infusing U.S. human rights policy with new credibility on responding to mass atrocities. LGBT issues. women in conflict; using U.S. activism in the U.N. Human

Rights Council to improve its effectiveness dramatically.

10. Keeping the United States relevant to the Arab Spring. By choosing to ease out Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, play a key enabling role in the Libya intervention, and work hard if not so successfully behind the scenes in Bahrain and Yemen, Washington kept itself relevant to the conversation in a changing Arab world — no small achievement, despite how far short it falls of hopes both there and here.

Missed Opportunities:

1. A durable legal architecture for counterterrorism. Few in or out of the administration foresaw the ferocity of opposition to closing the Guantánamo Bay prison or to civilian trials for terror suspects. In response, the administration decided not to expend political capital to finish cleaning up its inherited mess, or to release advisory opinions and decision-making processes on drones, targeted killings, and other features of the new counterterrorism approach. However politically sensible these choices in the short run, they create both legal and political vacuums that have allowed its opponents to put even torture back on the table — and may open the door for actions by future administrations that we will all live to regret.

2. Middle East peace. Nothing Obama did in 2009 and 2010 could have made Benjamin Netanyahu or Mahmoud Abbas a different politician, but the United States did not have to wind up in quite as deep a hole as we now find ourselves.

3. Civil-military rebalancing. The time legions of good people took to write new diplomacy and development policies, and staff up USAID, absorbed the moment where significant resource and issue transfers to the civilian agencies were financially possible. Sure, this is a boring bureaucratic issue, but, in a world dominated by economic power, also a vital one.

4. Foundations of U.S. strength. As with Guantánamo, Congress must bear the lion's share of the blame for last summer's embarrassing debt-ceiling posturing and the even-more embarrassing failure of the "super-committee" set up to find budget cuts palatable to both sides of the aisle. But given the black eye the fracas (not to mention the too-small stimulus and its too-small results) has given to confidence in U.S. leadership abroad as well as at home, the administration must share the blame.

The Jury Is Still Out:

1. Iran, North Korea, and nonproliferation writ large. Can the combination of pressure now and promised inducements later pay off in peacefully moving either Iran or North Korea off the nuclear track? Can a second-term president with a solidly conservative Congress make good on the expansive promise of his 2009 nonproliferation agenda?

2. The global economy. The 2009 activism was major — but can a second-term Obama begin to enunciate a vision for globalization after the crash, and muster domestic support for U.S. leadership in it?

3. Climate change. Both international and domestic processes are in sore need of a new spark — can this administration provide it, or respond productively if someone else does?

Heather Hurlburt is executive director of the National Security Network.

Glenn Greenwald:

President Obama's achievements and setbacks can be roughly understood as ones of means and ends, respectively. When it comes to pursuit of his foreign-policy aims, he

has proven himself a far shrewder and more efficient technocratic manager than his predecessor. He has used diplomacy and covert sabotage to effectively isolate Iran, managed alliances to overthrow Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi, executed ruthless attacks to weaken al Qaeda, consolidated the power to wage wars and to detain and kill without congressional (or judicial) interference, strengthened ties with key allies in the Middle East (including Israel), and has generally been much smarter and more subtle than George W. Bush about using American power against the nation's perceived enemies and on behalf of its allies.

But the goals to which that shrewdness has been applied have been extremely ill-advised. A core promise of the Obama presidency — to improve America's standing in the world — has been thwarted, as the nation is now viewed as unfavorably in the Muslim world, if not more so, as it was during the Bush years. Obama's steadfast support for Arab dictators, his ongoing subservience to the Israeli government, and his penchant for violence, aggression, and civilian slaughter in that region are the culprits. The war in Afghanistan, which he escalated, remains a disaster. Serious tensions with Pakistan — which even Bush was smart enough to avoid — are more dangerous than ever; along with the collapse of any prospects for an Israeli/Palestinian peace agreement, that is probably his worst foreign-policy failure. One achievement commonly credited to Obama — the ending of the Iraq War — was actually negotiated by Bush and forced on Obama by his failure to convince the Iraqis to let U.S. forces remain, and thus does not belong in the success category. In sum, Obama has deftly and intelligently pursued ignominious and ignoble foreign-policy goals.

Glenn Greenwald is a contributing writer at Salon.com and author of three New York Times bestselling books.