

# The Sum of Obama's Foreign Policy Parts

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The end of the war in Iraq demonstrates the success, and the ambiguous nature of that success, that has characterized much of President Barack Obama's foreign policy. In some respects, the Obama administration has several substantial foreign policy accomplishments to which it can point on the eve of an election year. The capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden and winding down the war in Iraq are the most visible, but the administration has also responded effectively to some global events in places like North Africa and Russia wisely.

For example, the administration has avoided making too many strong statements about the current situation in Russia which would strengthen Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's narrative that the problem in Russia is excessive intervention by the American government, rather than excessive authoritarianism and election fraud by the Russian government. Similarly, although the Obama administration was, at times, frustratingly silent during the early days of the protests in Egypt, and displayed far more confidence than was deserved in the interest various North African autocrats held in reforming, the outcomes have been positive. In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak resigned; and in Libya, Moammar Gaddafi was forced from office.

The problem the Obama administration faces, both politically and substantively, is that while it has numerous foreign policy accomplishments to which it can point, the whole to which they add up remains less than the sum of its parts. For example, while the killing of Bin Laden is something about which Americans are rightfully happy, and the conclusion of the military effort in Iraq, while almost a decade late and a few trillion dollars short, is also a good thing for the U.S., the overall impact these things have on American security, stability in South Asia or the Middle East or other related issues is less clear.

This is partially due to the vexing nature of these problems. The war in Iraq, for example, had created a range of problems that could not be easily solved by the U.S. beginning in 2009. Similarly, killing Bin Laden was never on its own going to eliminate the threat of Jihadist terror, but there are other factors to be considered as well. The Obama administration's occasionally cautious approach to foreign policy necessitates downplaying both expectations and accomplishments. Thus, the absence of sweeping statements and ambitious goals can be frustrating to American audiences, but often lead to better outcomes.

On the other hand, this unwillingness to set ambitious or creative goals has contributed to the administration's inability to consider bolder decisions and approaches. The killing of Bin Laden, for example, does not change the situation in Afghanistan where Obama has talked himself, and the country, into a war that continues with no clear end, or even goals, in sight. Similarly, the administration's commitment to a U.S. position as a global hegemon spending billions of dollars it no longer has in this endeavor reflects a commitment to conventional, and increasingly unsustainable approaches to foreign policy.

In this context, the accomplishments of the Obama administration will never seem satisfactory, either to opponents of the administration who seek out any opportunity to criticize the president, but more significantly, to observers who cannot help but note the distressing state of international affairs despite several high profile successes by the administration.

For Obama to craft a foreign policy that sews together his impressive accomplishments in a way that more concretely makes the U.S. stronger and more secure, the administration will have to demonstrate a willingness to move away from the received Washington wisdom and the logic of the foreign policy bureaucracy, and develop an approach to foreign policy that reflects the new fiscal realities at home and multi-lateral nature of the world today. This will not be easy, but if the U.S. does not do this, its role in the world will be reduced anyway, but definitively not on America's terms.