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## Obama's Year One: Contra

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President Obama's policies toward Afghanistan and Iran—or lack thereof—have received more attention than any other issues during his first year in office. And with good reason. An American defeat in Afghanistan would throw an already dangerous region further into turmoil and severely damage America's reputation for reliability around the world. Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would bring about a substantial shift in the regional power balance against the United States and its allies, spark a new round of global proliferation, provide a significant boost to the forces of Islamic radicalism, and bring the United States that much further under the shadow of nuclear terrorism. If Obama's policies were to produce a geopolitical doubleheader—defeat in Afghanistan *and* a nuclear-armed Iran—his historical legacy could wind up being a good deal worse than that of his predecessor. If he manages to make progress in Afghanistan and finds some way to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, he will be remembered for saving the world from a dire situation. Less noticed amidst these crises, however, has been a broader shift in American foreign policy that could have equally great and possibly longer-lasting implications. The Obama presidency may mark the beginning of a new era in American foreign policy and be seen as the moment when the United States finally turned away from the grand strategy it adopted after World War II and assumed a different relationship to the rest of the world.

The old strategy, which survived for six decades, rested on three pillars: military and economic primacy, what Truman-era strategists called a "preponderance of power," especially in Europe and East Asia; a global network of formal military and political alliances, mostly though not exclusively with fellow democracies; and an open trading and financial system. The idea, as Averell Harriman explained back in 1947, was to create "a balance of power preponderantly in favor of the free countries." Nations outside the liberal order were to be checked and, in time, transformed, as George F. Kennan suggested in his Long Telegram and as Paul Nitze's famous strategy document, NSC-68, reiterated. The goal, expressed by Harry Truman in 1947, was first to strengthen "freedom-loving nations" and then to "create the conditions that will lead eventually to personal freedom and happiness for all mankind."

It is often said that Bill Clinton was the first post-Cold War president, but in many ways the Clinton presidency was devoted to completing the mission as set out by the architects of America's post-World War II strategy. The National Security Strategy Document of 1996, as Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier observe in *America Between the Wars*, used the words "democracy" or "democratic" more than 130 times. As Clinton's term ended, American foreign policy rested on the same three pillars as in the days of Truman and Acheson: the primacy of America, now cast as the "indispensable nation"; an expanding alliance of democratic nations; and an open economic order operating in line with the "Washington consensus."

Obama and his foreign policy team have apparently rejected two of the main pillars of this post-World War II strategy. Instead of attempting to perpetuate American primacy, they are seeking to manage what they regard as America's unavoidable decline relative to other great powers. They see themselves as the architects of the "post-American" world. Although they will not say so publicly, in private they are fairly open about their policy of managed decline. In dealings with China, especially, administration officials believe they are playing from a hopelessly weak hand. Instead of trying to reverse the decline of American power, however, they are reorienting American foreign

policy to adjust to it.

The new strategy requires, in their view, accommodating the world's rising powers, principally China and Russia, rather than attempting to contain the ambitions of those powers. Their accommodation consists in granting China and Russia what rising powers always want: greater respect for their political systems at home and greater hegemony within their respective regions.

This accommodation in turn has required a certain distancing from the post-World War II allies. Increasing cooperation with the two great powers would be difficult if not impossible if the United States remained committed to the old alliances which were, after all, originally designed to contain them—NATO in the case of Russia, and, in the case of China, the bilateral alliances with Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and the new strategic partnership with India. Despite paying lip service to “multilateralism,” the Obama administration does not intend to build its foreign policy around these alliances, which some officials regard as relics of the Cold War. The administration seeks instead to create a new “international architecture” with a global consortium of powers—the G-20 world.

This might seem like realism to some, because accommodating allegedly stronger powers is a hallmark of realist foreign policy. Henry Kissinger practiced it in the years of Vietnam and détente, when the United States seemed weak and the Soviet Union strong. But there is also in this approach a remarkable idealism about the way the world works that Kissinger would never have endorsed. The Obama administration's core assumption, oft-repeated by the president and his advisers, is that the great powers today share common interests. Relations among them need “no longer be seen as a zero sum game,” Obama has argued. The Obama Doctrine is about “win-win” and “getting to ‘yes.’” The new “mission” of the United States, according to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, is to be the great convener of nations, gathering the powers to further common interests and seek common solutions to the world's problems. It is on this basis that the administration has sought to “reset” relations with Russia, embark on a new policy of “strategic reassurance” with China, and in general seek what Clinton has called a “new era of engagement based on common interests, shared values, and mutual respect.” Administration officials play down the idea that great powers have clashing interests that might hamper cooperation. This extends to the question of ideology, where the administration either denies or makes light of the possibility that autocratic powers may have fundamentally different perceptions of their interests than democracies.

The new American posture they propose is increasingly one of neutrality. In order to be the world's “convener,” after all, the United States cannot play favorites, either between allies and adversaries, or between democrats and tyrants. A common feature of the administration's first year, not surprisingly, has been the slighting of traditional allies in an effort to seek better ties and cooperation with erstwhile and future competitors or adversaries. In Europe, American relations with Poland and the Czech Republic, and by extension other Eastern European nations, suffered when the administration canceled a missile defense deployment in deference to Russian demands. In the Middle East, relations with Israel have suffered as a result of the Obama administration's pressure on the question of settlements, which was aimed at gaining better cooperation from the Palestinians and their Arab supporters. In Asia, relations with India, Japan, and Taiwan have suffered as a result of the administration's accommodating policy of “strategic reassurance” to China. In Latin America, Obama's apparent desire to improve relations with Hugo Chávez's Venezuela and Raúl Castro's Cuba have created insecurity among close allies like Colombia and anti-Chávez forces in Honduras and elsewhere.

The problem is that while the administration may not believe great-power relations need to be “zero-sum,” the reality is that throughout the world's contested regions, an American tilt toward

former adversaries unavoidably comes at the expense of friends. If an aggrieved Russia demands that the West respect a sphere of influence in its old imperial domain, there is no “win-win” solution. Either Russian influence grows, and the ability of neighboring powers to resist it weakens. Or Russian ambitions for a sphere of special interest are checked, and Russia is unhappy. In Asia, the United States is either going to continue playing the role of balancer against Chinese power, or it is not. And if it is not, then American alliances in the region must suffer.

For a United States bent on “problem solving” with Russia and China, the easiest solution may be to accede to their desires, compelling those in their presumed spheres of influence to accede as well.

This cannot help but alter America’s relations with its allies.

As it happens, the vast majority of those allies happen to be democracies, while the great powers being accommodated happen to be autocracies. The Obama administration’s apparent eschewing of the democracy agenda is not just a matter of abandoning the allegedly idealistic notion of democracy promotion in failed or transition states. It is not choosing not to promote democracy in Egypt or Pakistan or Afghanistan. And it is not just about whether to continue to press Russia and China for reform—which was part of the old post-World War II strategy, continued under post-Cold War administrations. The Obama administration’s new approach raises the question of whether the United States will continue to favor democracies, including allied democracies, in their disputes with the great-power autocracies, or whether the United States will now begin to adopt a more neutral posture in an effort to get to “yes” with the great autocratic powers. In this new mode, the United States may be unhooking itself from the alliance structures it had erected in the post-World War II strategy.

In fact, as part of its recalibration of American strategy, the Obama administration has inevitably de-emphasized the importance of democracy in the hierarchy of American interests. Most have assumed this is a reaction to George W. Bush’s rhetorical support for democracy promotion, allegedly discredited by the Iraq War. This may be part of the explanation. But the Obama administration’s de-emphasis of democracy should also be understood as the direct consequence of its new geopolitical strategy—a sign of America’s new international neutrality.

As part of what the Obama administration calls the “new era of engagement,” the United States has also moved toward a more disinterested posture in the struggle between autocratic governments and their political opponents. This has certainly been the case in Iran, where the Obama administration has gone out of its way to avoid doing anything that could be construed as sympathizing with the Iranian opposition against the autocratic clerical regime. Indeed, Obama’s strategy toward Iran has placed the United States objectively on the side of the government’s efforts to return to normalcy as quickly as possible, rather than in league with the opposition’s efforts to prolong the crisis. Engagement with Tehran has meant a studious disengagement from the regime’s opponents. The same has been true in its dealings with China. Only in the case of Russia has the administration continued to voice some support for civil opposition figures. But increasingly autocratic trends in Russia have not been allowed to get in the way of the “reset.”

All of this might seem to have the flavor of a new realism in American foreign policy. But, again, Obama’s approach derives from an idealistic premise: that the United States can approach the world as a disinterested promoter of the common good, that its interests do not clash with those of the other great powers, and that better relations can be had if the United States demonstrates its good intentions to other powers. During the Cold War, Obama officials argue, the United States used its power to take sides. Now the Obama administration seeks to be a friend to all. Obama’s foreign policy increasingly seems to rest on the supposition that other nations will act on the basis of what they perceive to be the goodwill, good intentions, moral purity, and disinterestedness of the United States. If other nations have refused to cooperate with the United States, it is because they perceive the United States as somehow against them, which, of course, it was. Obama is working to

change that perception. From the outreach to Iran and the Muslim world, to the call for the elimination of all nuclear weapons, to the desire for a "reset" in relations with Russia, the central point of Obama's diplomacy is that America is now different. It is better. It is no longer choosing sides. And, therefore, it is time for other nations to cooperate.

Obama believes that his own story is a powerful foreign policy tool in this regard, that drawing attention to what makes him different, not only from Bush but from all past American presidents, will lead the world to take a fresh look at America and its policies and make new diplomatic settlements possible. He hopes that by displaying earnestness to change American practices, he can build an image of greater moral purity, and that this in turn will produce diplomatic triumphs that have hitherto eluded us.

The last president who sincerely pursued this approach was Woodrow Wilson. He, too, believed that the display of evident goodwill and desire for peace, uncorrupted by the base motives of national interest or ambition, gave him the special moral authority to sway other nations. His gifts to persuade, however, proved ephemeral. Not only the nations of Europe but his own United States proved more self-interested and less amenable to moral appeals. We will see whether Obama fares better. But, so far, the signs are not promising.

Indeed, as one watches the Obama administration launch its "new era of engagement," one wonders whether the Obama team can ever acknowledge that it has failed. And if it does acknowledge it, what then? Will the administration then realize that the world cannot so easily be made anew, that the old challenges remain, and that the best strategy may be closer to that which was pursued by so many presidents of different political inclinations since World War II: America as the world's "indispensable nation"? The question then will be not how to manage American decline, but how to prevent it.

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