

Fatigue or Repair? Notes on United States Foreign Policy Under Obama

Desgaste ou Renovação? Algumas Reflexões Sobre a Política Externa de Obama

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The eagle has not crashed landed,¹ despite the expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Facing historic domestic and foreign policy challenges, U.S. President Barack Obama has largely followed his campaign's most prominent foreign policy prescriptions at a time when most U.S. citizens are increasingly looking inward. As Pecequillo and Batista (2009) note, former U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney and others associated with the Neo-conservative movement harassed the new administration as long as accumulating reality allowed, eventually receding as President Obama demonstrated a strong grasp over foreign policy and national defense. It did not take long for the *neo-cons* and many in the Republican party to recognize that the Obama administration would succeed or fail not because of foreign policy, but by its responses to the domestic economic crisis, mounting unemployment, and the storm swirling around the much anticipated, but controversial health care reform.

There is sparse evidence to suggest that the Obama administration's foreign policy is fatigued as Arraes (2010) concludes. Yet, there is accumulating evidence to suggest that President Obama is achieving important policy objectives related to international security and the *war against global terrorism*. This is not to say that President Obama is winning over domestic political support with his management of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. His administration's approval rating is trending down, in tandem with historic levels of unemployment and a slow recovery that drag downs his evident personal popularity. However, President Obama has steered a rare, but strategic bipartisan consensus in favor of drawing down troops in Iraq and *fighting the good fight* in Afghanistan; at least for a while longer before moving on to a new strategy to fight Al-Qaeda and international terrorism.

Democratic party presidential candidate Obama sought to renew U.S. leadership in the world by moving beyond the poorly crafted and dangerously administered war to depose Saddam Hussein in Iraq. His campaign's foreign policy manifesto, published in *Foreign Affairs*, argued for a "responsible end" to the war in Iraq accompanied with a broader focus on the Middle East.² Aside from revitalizing the U.S. military and launching renewed efforts to advance the cause of non-proliferation (from a U.S. government perspective), candidate Obama promised to forge a new plan to combat global terrorism, including a focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is this point that Arraes (2010) takes issue with by proposing that the "mere migration of U.S. troops from Iraq to Afghanistan" serves only to repeat the former Republican administration's policies, a clear sign of fatigue. Arraes's early conclusion is far from certain and was published immediately after President's Obama's review of the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy in late 2009.

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1 See Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Eagle Has Crash Landed. Foreign Policy*. July/August 2002 for an early and one of the most thoughtful critiques of U.S. foreign policy from a post-hegemonic perspective.

2 Barack Obama. "Renewing American Leadership." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 86, Issue 4 (July/August 2007:2-16).

It is true that the Obama administration will have withdrawn 94,000 troops from Iraq by the end of August, 2010. President Obama recently explained this policy,

“Make no mistake, our commitment in Iraq is changing – from a military effort led by our troops to a civilian effort led by our diplomats.”³

Moreover, it is correct that troop levels have surged in Afghanistan under the Obama administration’s late 2009 policy review, from 33,000 when the president took office in January of 2009 to a planned 96,000 by the end of September, 2010.⁴ Even with lessening expenditures for the war in Iraq during the 2010 fiscal year, war spending for both Afghanistan and Iraq continues to remain at historically high levels, just below the all time high reached during the 2008 fiscal year. What is far less evident is whether Obama’s reset on Afghanistan and graduated withdrawal from Iraq reflects a worn out U.S. foreign policy or one under repair. It is simply too early to know.

President Obama is following his foreign policy blueprint while navigating a deep, dangerous recession with equally historic domestic policy reforms to stimulate the economy, overhaul the delivery of health care and the health insurance market, and install a new regulatory regime for financial services in the wake of Wall Street’s reckless bull run. His planned withdrawal from Iraq may create unanticipated challenges and his administration’s counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan may only inflame the Taliban and the global Al-Qaeda network; all before President Obama can downshift into a less bellicose and more civilian based effort to galvanize greater international security. Yet, these highlighted foreign policies, including the consequent loss of life and property, do not constitute the last gasps of an exhausted global power. Rather, they represent a retooling of U.S. foreign policy cast from President Obama’s impressive political resolve amidst great uncertainty and cost. The recent efforts of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to bring the fight to the Taliban, and the concurrent spike in violence and combat, underscore the U.S. government’s resilience whether misguided or not.⁵

By and large U.S. citizens demonstrate little interest in either Afghanistan or Iraq. To be sure, growing numbers of citizens and their elected officials are calling for an end to the use of military force in both countries as the electoral politics of the mid-term elections swing inward toward the economy and unemployment. In recent public opinion polls sponsored by CNN, CBS, FOX News, and NBC News/Wall Street Journal, less than ten percent of respondents thought the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were the nation’s top priorities.⁶ Surely the Obama administration is encouraged by these figures especially given the significant losses both these wars have exacted from U.S. military forces and taxpayers, not to mention Afghans and Iraqis. Most importantly, the decreasing appetite for war allows President Obama to downsize the U.S. military in Afghanistan in concert with his reelection efforts in 2012. Thus, the Obama administration has set itself up for success in Afghanistan; either by phasing down troops in accord with U.S. public opinion or winning the counterinsurgency battle over the “hearts and minds” of Afghans.⁷ The latter seems

3 President Barack Obama. “Remarks by the President at Disabled Veterans of America Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.” August 2, 2010 as accessed on August 10, 2010 and available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-disabled-veterans-america-conference-atlanta-georgia>.

4 See Amy Belasco. “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Costs and Other Potential Issues.” Congressional Research Service. July 9, 2009 and “Obama to Cut to U.S. Troop Levels in Iraq to 50,000, by end of August.” *Los Angeles Times*. August 2, 2010 as accessed on August 10, 2010 and available at: <http://www.latimes.com/sc-dc-0803-obama-iraq-20100802,0,5206858.story>.

5 See the most recent unclassified “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces,” as delivered to the U.S. Congress by the U.S. Department of Defense as accessed on August 10, 2010 and available at: http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_26_10.pdf.

6 As reported by PollingReport.com on its Problems and Priorities webpage as accessed on August 9, 2010 at: <http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>.

7 For a thoughtful and concise argument about how the U.S. can win in Afghanistan, see Anthony Cordesman’s “If Petraeus and Iikenberry Can Win.” Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 14, 2010 as accessed on August 10, 2010 and available at: <http://csis.org/publication/if-petraeus-and-eikenberry-can-win>.

improbable, but both options leave President Obama to claim some measure of success in comparison to the former Republican administration and in relationship to current public opinion.

The real policy challenge is whether President Obama can move beyond the Afghan war. Lassance (2010) suggests that just as former U.S. President Lyndon Johnson inherited the war in Vietnam and chose to magnify military efforts in hope of ending it quickly but to no avail; the current U.S. Commander in Chief's future is jeopardized by deploying additional troops to Afghanistan to achieve the stability and security necessary for diplomacy and nation building to work. President Johnson was a very popular president because of his groundbreaking domestic policies, but eventually succumbed to the exhaustion of a poorly conceived and executed war against the Vietnamese independence struggle. Despite scholastic temptation and Lassance's historical analysis, it is difficult to draw a neat comparison between these two armed conflicts and the experiences of Johnson or Obama. President Obama's reelection efforts and international leadership do not pivot on Afghanistan. Rather, the destiny of Afghanistan is much more reliant on Obama's resilience and leadership in the face of his imminent reelection challenge.

Aside from Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. foreign policy under Obama has delivered modest, but undeniable measures of success as defined by candidate Obama in 2007. These measures include the U.S. government's negotiation of a new START agreement with Russia. Despite the agreement's shortcomings, it certainly repairs the damage done by the former administration of President George W. Bush with respect to international collective security and non-proliferation. Also, President Obama's successful stewardship of his nation's partnership with India fortifies his non-proliferation credentials and may contribute to ultimately resolving the historic dispute between India and Pakistan, seemingly a key ingredient to bringing political stability to Afghanistan. Moreover, the Obama administration continues to engage China at the highest levels, increasing points of governmental contact and cooperation. Most importantly, President Obama has recommitted the United States to reset Israeli-Palestinian-Arab relations and placed a high priority on making graduated progress toward a two state solution. The administration even spearheaded a renewed round of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) economic sanctions against Iran, despite the innovative alternative presented by the Brazil-Turkey brokered uranium enrichment deal. Yes, these sanctions were largely designed to mute Republican party attacks on Obama's national security credentials, but they also demonstrate the U.S. administration's capacity to get what it wants from the permanent members of the UNSC, no easy trick these days. While none of these measures on their own signal the complete repair of U.S. foreign policy under the Obama administration, they collectively marshal an emerging, liberal internationalist foreign policy that promises to replace the misguided and unilateral foreign policy cookbook of ex-President George W. Bush.

If there is an area of U.S. foreign policy under Obama that deserves criticism and the characterization as worn out; it would be U.S. foreign policy for Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC). Abraham Lowenthal, a well known analyst of U.S.-LAC relations and sympathetic to the Obama administration, recently suggested that,

“By the end of the Obama administration's first year, however, the prevailing sentiment about its Latin America and Caribbean policy was turning to disappointment.”⁸

The Obama administration disappointed most in the region with its clumsy policy in Honduras following the June, 2009 coup that deposed elected President Manuel Zelaya as well as the roll out of the U.S.-Colombia defense agreement a month later. President Obama waffled on Honduras by first joining regional efforts to condemn the coup, but later going it alone to recognize the subsequent presidential elections to replace the military imposed government. Accordingly, the Obama administration implicitly accepted the interruption of democratic rule by providing its stamp of approval to the subsequent and questionable presidential elections, a dangerous precedent in the region. This

⁸ See his recent article, “Obama and the Americas.” *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 89, Issue 4 (July/August 2010).

policy turnaround served to distance the U.S. from the region, including Brazil, where most governments have yet to recognize the legitimacy of these elections and the new Honduran President.

Also, President Obama's announcement of a ten year defense agreement with Colombia without prior consultations with Colombia's neighbors, including Brazil, also served to detach the administration from regional allies and leaders. These actions serve to duplicate the worn out, unilateral approach to LAC and certainly undermine the Obama administration's credibility and appeals for transparency and multilateral cooperation in the region. Moreover, the role of former advisors to ex-President Bill Clinton and current Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the lobbying campaign conducted by the Honduran coup conspirators to quell Washington's opposition to coup coupled with Secretary Clinton's tacit threat against those LAC nation-states that engage Iran deepened the disappointment.⁹ Punctuating Obama's hapless policy for LAC is his failure to work directly with the Brazilian government on such pressing issues as climate change and non-proliferation. Taken together, these actions and policies certainly demonstrate the futility of Washington's convergence thesis as it applies to LAC and the urgent need to revise the Obama administration's policy framework to adapt to the new regional realities and leadership (Baeza and Langevin 2009).

While President Obama's policy treatment of LAC is as tired as that conducted by the former administration, his overall foreign policy is anything but fatigued. One does not have to adhere to Obama's version of the liberal internationalist credo or even support his foreign policy objectives to observe his administration's many efforts to refresh and reframe the U.S. international presence in the aftermath of eight disastrous years under ex-President Bush. More than most U.S. Presidents, Obama faces a plethora of domestic and foreign policy challenges that could end in a crash landing of historic proportions. Yet, Obama's modest, but growing list of domestic and foreign policy achievements lessens the probability of this thesis. For scholars of U.S. foreign policy, we will just have to wait and see.

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Resumo

Este breve artigo analisa alguns pontos chaves da política externa do governo Obama dos EUA, subsidiando o debate proposto por Arraes (2010). O artigo apresenta uma panorama de atuação que não apoia a hipótese do desgaste, pelo contrário. Com a exceção da America Latina e o Caribe, a atual política externa representa uma renovação ainda que seja incompleta.

⁹ See Conn Hallinan, "Honduran Coup: The U.S. Connection" (Washington, DC: *Foreign Policy In Focus*, August 5, 2009) for a review of the connections between the coup plotters and former Clinton advisor Lanny Davis.

Abstract

The brief article provides an analysis of several key points in the foreign policy under U.S. President Obama with respect to the argument advanced by Arraes (2010). This research note examines a policy panorama that does not support the fatigue hypothesis, to the contrary. With the notable exception of Latin America and the Caribbean, current U.S. foreign policy shows signs renovation, albeit incomplete.

Palavras-Chave: Afeganistão, Iraque, Presidente Obama, política externa dos EUA, guerra contra o terrorismo global.

Key words: Afghanistan, Iraq, President Obama, U.S. foreign policy, war against global terrorism.

