

COMMENTARY

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US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Caution and Partial Retreat?

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The conventional wisdom is that American presidents who win a second term are less bound by domestic electoral considerations that may impose constraints on their foreign policy. But in his second term, President Barack Obama is unlikely to take any bold initiatives in the Middle East. Indeed, he is far more likely not only to maintain a posture of general caution but also to oversee a partial strategic retreat.

A principal constraint shaping the second Obama administration's foreign policy is its reduced financial and economic resources. Cutting the US budget deficit is an urgent priority, even as costly items such as education reform and further restructuring of healthcare impose themselves on the domestic agenda. Rehabilitating dilapidated infrastructure – in part to avoid the costly damage caused by natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy – is also a growing imperative.

And, after initial hesitation, the Obama administration is now committed in the defence sphere to deploying anti-ballistic missile systems and upgrading its nuclear weapons arsenal, at an estimated cost of at least US \$352 billion over the coming decade and possibly considerably more. With hesitant economic recovery that is still highly vulnerable to the threat the European debt crisis poses to the global banking system, and unemployment standing at 7.9 percent (with underemployment at 14.7 percent in September), the United States will have to cut international commitments.

There are several implications for the US approach to the Middle East, all of which point to Washington adopting a relatively low profile regionally – certainly in terms of actively seeking to share leadership, if not to cede it to partners – and accommodating diverse local agendas.

The United States will maintain low-cost investments, of which its military assistance to Egypt is a foremost example. When the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces ruled Egypt in 2011-2012,

the Obama administration faced an awkward choice. On the one hand was its partnership with the Egyptian military to maintain the peace treaty with Israel and security arrangements along the border with Gaza – the key US interest in Egypt – and on the other, its advocacy of democratic transition. The peaceful transfer of power from the military to President Mohammad Mursi at the end of June 2012 and the military’s apparent withdrawal from national politics resolved this strain, even though the draft provisions of the new constitution currently under discussion award the Egyptian Armed Forces very considerable independence from democratic, civilian control.

The Egyptian model also applies throughout North Africa, where the rise of “centrist” Islamist or Islamist-backed governments has confronted US policymakers with an unfamiliar landscape. The rise of powerful Salafi parties – especially their more militant fringes in Tunisia and Libya – has been unnerving. The Obama administration has nonetheless responded by engaging politically – if somewhat cautiously – with new governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and by offering modest economic and security assistance.

The central US concern in North Africa, however, relates to the growing threat posed by jihadist organizations. Indeed, the same concern informs US policy toward the evolving Syrian crisis and completely dominates Yemen policy. This only underscores the US retreat, as relations and assistance focus increasingly narrowly on counterterrorism backed by a growing US reliance on drone attacks against jihadists in Yemen. A more effective strategy to counter radicalization would involve providing democratically elected, post-revolutionary governments whose legitimacy in the coming period will depend entirely on their ability to address poverty, unemployment, and social marginality with comprehensive support packages and economic assistance programs. But what the United States has offered is modest, even minimal.

The United States has distanced itself more visibly where it lacks the means or interest to influence the course of events directly. This is most evident in its policies toward Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The United States remains wholly unwilling to provide the Syrian opposition with advanced man-portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, let alone undertake any form of direct military action, despite its rhetorical commitment to the departure of President Bashar al-Assad. Washington clearly lacks both the means and the will to prevent what may prove to be a protracted military stalemate even though the risks of spill over to neighbouring countries increase with time.

Restraint is not all bad. The Obama administration has shown considerable restraint in dealing with the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, despite the presence of Hezbollah ministers in its ranks. No less significantly, the United States has accepted the Lebanese government’s policy of studied neutrality toward the Syrian crisis, understanding that subjecting it to political pressure or financial sanctions could bring it down, which would produce a power vacuum and possibly trigger sectarian violence.

But it is Iraq, where the United States invested massively in building the post-Saddam Hussein order over a period of eight years that most clearly reveals the limits of US means. Iraqi democratization has been real but also vulnerable to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s drive to concentrate key levers of power in his hands – the army, police, much of provincial government,

and public finance. While he seeks to carve out genuine autonomy from Iranian influence, he is also distinguishing himself as an independent player by diverging from US policy toward both Syria and Iran.

Surprisingly, Iran is where the United States may prefer to manage rather than transform the status quo. New sanctions were announced immediately after Obama's re-election, but the United States is also considering offering Iran "more for more" on the nuclear file: some relaxation of sanctions and other American concessions in return for verifiable caps on Iran's uranium enrichment program. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported in August that Iran had converted much of its enriched uranium into reactor fuel plates, delaying enrichment to weapons-grade levels by one or two years. This has considerably widened the window for further negotiation, even as the US Congress prepares to target Iranian assets overseas, imports, and oil industry. This is a strategy for containment, not confrontation.

Containment of Iran will be balanced, as "business as usual" will rule US relations with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This means tacit US acceptance of the growing restrictions on freedom of speech and peaceful assembly and on parliamentary or other representative politics in some member states, while maintaining arms sales – worth US \$38.2 billion to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in 2011 alone.

What also shapes US policy in the region is the reduction of American reliance on energy imports, as the United States is projected to become the world's largest oil producer by 2020. This is far from sufficient to prompt US disengagement, but it places the administration at a somewhat greater distance from the Middle East. It also suggests that, had he won the US presidential election, Obama's rival Mitt Romney would probably have behaved no differently.

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