

# Adapting to facts on the ground

BY CESARE MERLINI

Obama’s foreign policy bears the hallmarks of his professorial character. Every issue is weighed and debated. As events unfold, he adapts his actions to the contingencies on the ground rather than to predefined grand strategies.

When toward the end of February, President Obama was so reluctant to go beyond sanctions against Muammar Gaddafi and establish a no-fly zone over Libya, he was seen as a hesitant leader worldwide. But Obama and a few very close advisers around him knew something that the rest of us did not know. Flying objects of various kinds were zooming their sights on a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and the circle drawn by the CIA around Osama bin Laden was getting tighter and tighter. Thus, it was not simply that “of all countries in the region there, our real interests in Libya are minimal,” as former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft was reported as saying. The big hoped for event, bound to establish Obama’s image as Commander-in-Chief, was to happen elsewhere and develop in such a way as to translate the broad and vague “war on terror,” launched by his predecessor, into a very specific and very symbolic achievement: the killing of the mastermind of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, just a few months ahead of the tenth anniversary of 9/11.

Eventually, Ambassador Susan Rice did vote for the UN Security Council resolution introduced by Britain and France, once the crucial protection of the Libyan civilians (those rebelling) was added to the no-fly prescription. Until then it was openly opposed by Defense Secretary Robert Gates. But US participation in military action has remained limited, almost unwilling. For once the Europeans – in contrast to how they dealt with Slobodan Milosevic – were taking action, though with their customary divisions, including the surprising German abstention along with Russia and China in the UN Security Council vote.

An Afghan shopkeeper watches the news in a television store in Kabul on May 2, 2011 as President Obama announces that Osama bin Laden was killed in a firefight with US forces in Pakistan.







Americans in New York's Times Square react to the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011.

Eventually the President was in a position to exceptionally call upon the media on a Sunday night and announce that US Navy SEALs had successfully dispatched public enemy number one. Jubilant crowds flooded into the American streets, especially at Ground Zero in New York. The following day enthusiastic columnists spoke about the decapitation of al-Qaeda, about the US's right to execute the murderer of thousands of innocent American (and non-American) civilians, and about the appropriateness of taking violent action in an allied country without telling its untrustworthy government. The "declinist" mood that had pervaded much of academia began to lift, and suddenly there was talk of the assured re-election of the incumbent in 2012. Later, all these first hand comments became subject to qualifications, often to critical reappraisals, but the fact remained that American foreign and security policy had achieved a success, which commanded attention among friends and foes. This was more important than going after a ruthless but also clownish dictator in Tripoli, especially after he had forgone the development of nuclear weapons a few years earlier. Moreover, the truly serious problems emerging for the administration from the uprisings in the Arab world are different and located in other more strategically important states.

Initially, international relations were not Barack Obama's preferred field of interest. Nevertheless his personal story was such as to make parochialism un-

likely in his approach to public affairs. His instinctive inclination was progressive, and the pundits whose writings he privileged and with whom he later became acquainted were mostly liberal internationalists, such as Fareed Zakaria or Samantha Power. When he joined the Senate in 2005, the raging debate was about the Iraq War, also within the Democratic party. The new, uncharacteristically young member of the Foreign Relations Committee, confirmed his opposition to the war ever since its inception. That became particularly relevant in the Democratic primaries two years later, since his main opponent was Senator (and former First Lady) Hillary Clinton, a consistent supporter of the war.

Once he became the Democratic candidate, his views gradually turned less idealistic. In one of his campaign speeches the black Illinois senator once said: "The truth is that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush's father, of John F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, Ronald Reagan." Quite a synthesis. And once he entered the White House his choice for the State Department was his former opponent in the primaries, while the Pentagon remained under the leadership of the previous Secretary, a Republican. Also, the choice of his national security staff reflected a preference for moderate realists, to the disappointment of several liberal circles, some of which turned openly critical. President Obama, however, did not become oblivious to the tension between idealism and realism. He considers it a dialectical asset inherent in the American heritage as well as in his own current responsibilities, and he proudly pointed that out in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech at the end of 2009 in Oslo. In fact, many of his words and deeds on international affairs reveal a preference for extending hands to adversaries and being open to change with allies, at the risk of being accused of naivety. An appropriate definition of Barack Obama's guiding philosophy may thus be the one suggested by Ryan Lizza in *The New Yorker* (May 2, 2011): he is a "consequentialist," insofar as he adapts his still principled line of conduct to the facts on the ground rather than to predefined grand strategies.

This middle-of-the-road position of the President may be at the origin of much of the disarray of the Re-

ERIC THAYER / REUTERS



GORAN TOMASEVIC / REUTERS

publicans as far as foreign policy is concerned. The opposition is divided. They do, however, share the contradiction between advocating a US that still dictates the global agenda and wanting a light government that reduces the tax burden on the citizens – a contradiction made more acute by skyrocketing public debt. In any case, the various Republican factions tend to focus on domestic issues and often resort to populism, a combination that gave sizable returns in the midterm elections. Whether it will pay off at the presidential elections is open to question.

The results of Obama's pragmatic approach, until Abbottabad, were limited and certainly not exempt from critical evaluations by liberals and conservatives alike. Even honest critics, however, had to recognize the difficult situation he had inherited from his predecessor: two hard wars, one of which, Iraq, needed to be wound down as soon as possible, and the other, in Afghanistan, on the verge of spreading instability into the neighboring Pakistan, something that has indeed happened since. In addition, several events have come to make his task even harder, including the ouster of an important ally such as Hosni Mubarak. But the most severe challenge is the fiscal one: the most dramatic financial and economic downturn since the Great Depression – also a legacy from George W. Bush. The impact is above all on the domestic front, but it affects the international standing of the nation as well. Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

said, "The greatest long-term threat to the American national security is America's debt."

Taking all this into consideration, it may be remarkable that the young President has not made any major mistakes. But one can go further in assessing his foreign policy. "Consequential" to budgetary constraints, he seems to be steering his country on a difficult path of change by trying to do better – not more – with less. This does not sound like an ambitious strategy, but it may end up being the best way of handling the relative decline of America in the hierarchy of world powers – a decline no dead Osamas will stop – while keeping a sizable level of superiority, so as to maintain a decisive role in shaping the global system. That implies first a scaling down of US military superiority and its related costs (the defense budget is larger than those of the following 13 major powers put together) and thus partly "demilitarizing" American foreign policy, as Hillary Clinton advocates, with the unusual green light of the Pentagon. Second, it requires being very selective in taking on engagements, especially if they imply a military component – hence the perceived hesitations about Libya. Thirdly, alternative foreign and security policy tools going under Joseph Nye's famous label of "soft power" (subsequently modified as "smart power") need to be further developed. Last but certainly not least, the economic and fiscal house has to be put in order, probably the toughest assignment that will decide whether Obama will stay in the White

An Anti-Mubarak protester stands behind a banner in Cairo, Egypt, on February 1, 2011.





A Cairo souvenir shop owner displays a metal plaque reading “Obama, New Tutankhamun of the World” in 2009, ahead of Obama’s planned speech to address the Muslim world during his visit to Egypt.

House or sent back to Chicago in January 2013.

To synthesize this practical policy formula – which should not be called a strategy – one could use the title of a recent book by Michael Mandelbaum: *The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era*. It would be too long to go through the various cases in which such a formula could be put to the test in the coming 18 months, but it may be useful to briefly mention the two major geopolitical theatres where the President will likely be faced with difficult choices. Let’s begin with the Middle East. There is a fair amount of implicit optimism in the definition of “Arab Spring” given to the movement initiated in the squares of Tunisia and Egypt. Even more so if it implies a comparison with the historical transformation that took place in Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Yet, whatever the immediate political outcome or the new Islamic influence in this or that country, Arab society has signaled the beginning of a change it had previously been deemed incapable of. The number one dilemma for the US is thus whether to encourage the change – under the assumption that it will make that society a better partner to deal with in the long run – or espouse the regimes, either new (as in North Africa) or surviving the “spring” (as in the Arab peninsula), no matter how repressive, in view of their being an exponent to short-term American interests in the area.

Obama has some vantage points in dealing with this dilemma. When in June 2009 he spoke to the students at Cairo University he was not aware of facing a sample of the future crowds that would one day un-

settle the very host of his visit. The fact that the same crowds were not burning American flags during the demonstrations, for once, despite the initial and understandable hesitations of the administration is not inconsequential. At the same time, Washington has maintained significant leverage, either economic (as with Egypt) or strategic (as with Saudi Arabia). Finally, the fate of Osama bin Laden has generated limited mourning among the Muslims, while at the same time enhancing the image among the rulers that America, occasionally, can still get things done.

The inevitable case-by-case approach to be followed by the Obama administration will allow for more consistent and strategic guidelines, thus serving deeper and longer-term national interests, if two main conditions are met. The first is to accelerate the withdrawal from Iraq and the disentanglement from Afghanistan. The costs related to the instabilities likely to remain behind in both cases will probably be compensated by both the savings in military expenditure and a less interventionist image of a “frugal” United States. The second condition is to resume the Israeli-Palestinian peace process on the basis of the radically new situation affecting all surrounding countries. The agreement between Fatah and Hamas, however fragile, is a product of change both in Egypt and in Syria and will likely help the diplomatic offensive for the international recognition of a Palestinian state. Several voices, in Israel and among the American Jews, have called upon the President for such resumption, which may be crucial in avoiding getting cornered in a position that would jeopardize a way out of this Middle Eastern dilemma. The cautious approach adopted in his recent speech at the State Department seemed to fall short of these expectations, but it reflected the new situation in which the US shies away from trying to impose solutions, unlikely to succeed, and rather attempts to “lead from behind,” as suggested by one White House official. More important was the choice of framing the Israeli-Palestinian issue within the broader process of Arab change, apparently with an approach to the latter that is no longer dictated by the imperatives of the former.

The region certainly commands priority attention ahead of the 2012 elections, but it may not be the most important one for Obama, if his hoped-for second

term is to be taken into consideration.

During the 1970s and 1980s, while the then European Community was going through periodical institutional overhauls and enlargements, a funny story could be heard around US foreign policy circles. A sleeping man, the story said, was regularly visited by the dream of a girl getting bigger and bigger every night, so that he eventually got scared and asked her what she wanted. The girl, by now a fat lady, replied: I don’t know, it’s your dream. The man was America, of course, and the woman Europe. Today that dream is long gone. The story nonetheless could be resumed, provided that two changes are made: the woman is now Asia and the dream may be a nightmare.

In fact the specter of American decline is mostly due to the changing hierarchy of global powers, which is being climbed by new states, mainly Asian, thanks to their burgeoning economies in an environment largely generated by the West – that is, by Western (American, above all) policies in favor of free trade and by the Western (also mostly American) private sector generating investment and spreading technology. The People’s Republic of China is the main beneficiary. Simultaneously, it is a very important strategic challenger to the United States and the most vital capital lender for its hugely indebted economy. Beijing, along with the capitals of other emerging economies, tends to act more as a hitchhiker than as a stake-holder in the system of international institutions. It does this in order to continue to reaping the benefits of the new globalization, while sticking to the old rules of national sovereignty, including rigid non-interference in internal affairs.

Here comes what might be the most serious policy dilemma for Barak Obama: whether to keep sponsoring interdependence and be open to a more substantial participation by the newcomers in the Western-generated mechanisms that try to organize the system, or to take a few steps back towards the golden rule of realpolitik: balance of power. The first horn of the dilemma can itself be split further into two options: either to give priority to the rule of the market or to the rule of law. The same with the second horn, that can contemplate either building around China a sort of containment alliance, reminiscent of the Cold War, or



Activists associated with the social group Muthahida Shehri Mahaz (United Citizens Alliance) in Multan, Pakistan, shout anti-American slogans while holding an image of Barack Obama during a protest on May 8, 2011 condemning the killing of Osama bin Laden.

dealing more or less confrontationally with the rival would-be superpower on a bilateral footing, “frugality” notwithstanding. Again, choices will – de facto – be a mix of these apparently alternative paradigms, but the prevalence of one over the other will translate into consistency and thus strength.

The reader might be struck by the absence of Europe in the this quick survey of the President’s foreign policy options – if not for a few references to the past. That reflects the current American analysis of the present and future global role of the US, by both officials and pundits – with few exceptions, mainly among liberal internationalists. The disappointment with the EU’s failures to act according to its size and economic power explains this widespread attitude.

However, of the above listed solutions in either of the two major geostrategic theatres, those prizing reform, interdependence, the rule of law and multilateralism are likely to require a fair degree of synergy with that unique mix of nation states and sovereignty sharing institutions that is the European Union, still the US’s largest trade and investment partner, as well as its most like-minded ally. Barak Obama is probably the least “transatlantic” president in American history, but as a “consequentialist” he will probably end up taking those facts into proper consideration.

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