

Obama's Weak and Failing States Agenda

Barack Obama has been a disciplined, pragmatic, and effective president on the urgent national security challenges of the day. His record is generally solid on matters such as managing the nation's major wars, pressuring rogue states, rebalancing the U.S. national security focus toward East Asia, and carrying out the reset policy with Russia. On balance, I would personally rate his foreign policy record through most of his first term as much better than average, with perhaps only George H.W. Bush having done clearly better at this stage among all presidents of the last half century.

But those glowing words aside, Obama has had difficulty measuring up to the standards he set for himself on the big visions and transformational issues of the day—subjects ranging from addressing global warming and climate change to bridging the divide with the Muslim world to moving toward a nuclear-free planet (what might be called the Prague Agenda, named for the site of Obama's big speech on the subject in 2009).¹ Leaving aside the top-tier security issues of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and now Syria that merit their own attention (and generally receive it), he has also had considerable trouble with the chronic problems of weak, failing, or otherwise challenged states. This article briefly summarizes his record toward five disparate but important countries facing internal conflicts of one type or another—the African states of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, and Sudan, as well as the Latin American states of Colombia and Mexico. Of the five, only one is generally moving in the right direction today, Colombia, and that is for reasons that have little to do with any new U.S. policy. These five countries are not chosen

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randomly: the two in this hemisphere have major direct importance for American security; the three in Africa have suffered perhaps the world's worst wars of the modern era, as measured by lethality and duration. They are also places Senator Obama had addressed before winning the presidency, making it appropriate to contrast what he once advocated on Capitol Hill with what he has been able to do in the White House.

As the presidential election nears, it is important to understand why this part of the U.S. national security agenda—what one might loosely term the “soft security agenda”—has remained so difficult to address even for Obama, with his longstanding interest in such challenges, and to identify what he or a new Republican president could do beginning in 2013.

Obama's Early Thinking on the “Soft Security Agenda”

From early on in his national political career, Barack Obama sought to address the *mélange* of issues that fall into the soft security agenda in a serious and systematic way. Obama clearly saw them as crucial to U.S. national security. Indeed, the first half of his main chapter about foreign policy in his 2006 book *The Audacity of Hope*, before he even mentions Iraq or nuclear nonproliferation or defense spending, uses lessons from his years growing up in Indonesia as a template for understanding the world and its challenges. He concludes the chapter with a final section on the portion of foreign policy “... that has less to do with avoiding war than promoting peace,” underscoring again how central such matters are to his worldview. As then-Senator Obama put it, if the United States is to “serve our long-term security interests—then we will have to go beyond a more prudent use of military force. We will have to align our policies to help reduce the spheres of insecurity, poverty, and violence around the world, and give more people a stake in the global order that has served us so well.”² Collectively, these sorts of issues might be termed the soft security agenda because they do not generally constitute clear and present dangers to the United States (though Mexico and Colombia are partial exceptions here), yet they do affect its broader national security, especially over the longer term.

For Obama, while all of these new threats and opportunities did not supplant the traditional national security agenda, they were central to the planet's future—he believed that these issues were too important to ignore, or even to defer for very long in his first term. His political strategy seemed to be that by making sure he addressed the wars and core economic issues successfully, he would also be able to address nontraditional threats without appearing weak on national security. Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Middle East peace process, the rise of China, Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs—none of these

would be relegated to lesser importance, but none of them would be allowed to displace attention to the soft security agenda either.

Yet to date, President Obama has not bent history in any major way on this set of issues. Mexico is more troubled than when he took office, and the related challenge of illegal immigration in U.S. politics has not proved amenable to Obama's hopes of forging a post-partisan style of policymaking. Colombia is still doing pretty well, due to its own efforts and the support provided by the United States through Plan Colombia—but that is the result of Bill Clinton's and George W. Bush's policies primarily; Obama has done little to build on them. Challenges for truly failed or failing states like the DRC have not been alleviated on Obama's watch. Sudan has successfully separated, but the two Sudans remain at an impasse over how to share oil and resolve enduring territorial disputes, and the situation is highly fraught. Fortunately, beyond these specific cases, the level of civil conflict around the world has declined by about half since the end of the Cold War.³ But that progress predated Obama.

Some point to the 2011 Libya operation as proof of a breakthrough in addressing the problems of civil conflict and state weakness. While still highly unstable, Libya has in fact been a success to date, on balance, despite the tragic death of four American diplomats in September of 2012. Certainly in his response to the Libya crisis, President Obama—assisted by the tireless efforts of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and UN Ambassador Susan Rice, among others—succeeded in passing a UN Security Council Resolution that reinforced the principle of the “responsibility to protect.” In addition to NATO, he enlisted at least two Arab states in the effort to implement the resolution. Gaining the participation of key regional players was smarter than other approaches which might have been considered, such as seeking the approval of a Western-dominated community of democracies for key decisions on the use of force, which could have unnecessarily and unproductively exacerbated tensions with the likes of China and Russia even more than the adopted approach wound up doing.⁴

But compared with other human tragedies of the day, the Libya crisis was relatively minor. The breakthrough associated with the Libya intervention has been modest, and certainly no greater than the international community's growing acceptance of a “responsibility to protect” that occurred during the tenures of the two previous U.S. presidents.⁵ The operation was pragmatically handled, but it has provided no paradigm for future action, no indicator of a future Obama doctrine of humanitarian intervention that could be widely applied throughout the world. It could actually set back that broader cause, because the original mission to protect Libyan citizens as authorized under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 morphed into an effort to remove Muammar Qaddafi from power. Russia, China, India, and Brazil stridently objected, ensuring that the same principle of “responsibility to protect” was not extended by the

international community to the people of Syria in their revolt against its brutal regime. At the time of this writing, Western powers remain at a major impasse at the United Nations (and elsewhere) with Russia and China on this issue.

Three Cases from Africa

In fact, for those who care about the broader direction of the planet and the humanitarian agenda, several countries in Africa—the DRC, Somalia, and Sudan—present problems of even greater magnitude than Libya or Syria. In Sudan, where the northern and southern parts of the country have gone their separate ways, the Obama administration got off to a slow start. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement mandated the 2011 referendum on separation and led to the creation of South Sudan on July 9, 2011. But it was negotiated primarily on the Bush administration's watch. In late 2010 and into 2011, the Obama administration worked on its Sudan diplomacy more energetically. Special Envoy for Sudan Princeton Lyman stepped up the U.S. role in the process, and the administration also promoted a UN peacekeeping force for the disputed area around Abyei (on the border between Sudan and South Sudan), the status of which is not yet resolved.⁶

Yet the basic situation, in which Sudan controls the only pipeline to the sea but less-populous South Sudan possesses most of the oil, can work only if the two sides see each other as necessary partners. That is not happening at present, and after the first year of independence there is little happy news to report concerning North–South relations. Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir's actions could lead South Sudan to build a pipeline bypassing the north while claiming all rights of ownership to the oil,⁷ and escalating conflicts could arise from residual territorial

disputes. The latter could occur over an issue like the still-unresolved status of Abyei, or over a specific region inside Khartoum's territory but adjoining South Sudan, such as Nuba or the Blue Nile State.⁸ Oil is not currently flowing through the pipeline due to disputes over transit fees, meaning that both Sudans are deprived of desperately needed revenue because of their dysfunctional relationship.

Dealing with a government in Sudan run by an accused war criminal is hardly an easy diplomatic task. Nevertheless, Obama's thinking

on humanitarian intervention, applied so impressively in the case of Libya in March 2011, would seem to demand attention to a place that has been far bloodier in recent times. Unfortunately, the administration's role has been less energetic, dynamic, and preventive in character than it might have been.⁹ In

Oabama's thinking on humanitarian intervention would seem to demand attention to Sudan.

addition, the Obama administration appeared too reliant on positive incentives such as debt relief and an end to sanctions, and not willing enough to toughen sanctions on Khartoum or support further International Criminal Court indictments in the event of violence by Bashir and his cronies.¹⁰ Now, with an already overwhelming inbox, it is doing little to help the two Sudans find a compromise solution.

The DRC is another troubling case. It has, by some measures, suffered more war-related death than any other place on Earth over the last 10–15 years—due not so much to direct killing as to the breakdown of the state and, as a result, health care and nutrition. Reliable estimates put the mortality figures at nearly three million over this period.¹¹ While the violence has subsided some in recent years, the lack of effective governance in the country ensures that war-related lethality remains considerable.¹² Yet the Obama administration's policies have done little to repair the situation.

The administration, for example, did not act on recommendations to beef up the UN peace mission or work to help reform and professionalize the Congolese security forces.¹³ UN troop numbers have increased slightly during the Obama administration's time in office—the mission strength increased from about 17,000 to 18,000 in a country several times the size of Iraq or Afghanistan, with twice the population of either.¹⁴ U.S. direct assistance has remained around Bush-era levels. (President Obama's annual aid levels for Congo, actual and proposed, have been in the approximate range of \$210 million to \$280 million; under President Bush, aid levels combined for Congo were roughly \$200 million to \$300 million.)¹⁵ No substantial initiatives have been undertaken to help other Congolese institutions, such as the judiciary and legislative branches of government, function more effectively.¹⁶

One more important case—an especially delicate one for a Democratic president—is Somalia, where Bill Clinton encountered huge problems after the October 1993 “Black Hawk Down” tragedy. Since that time, Somalia has teetered between a failed state and a non-state. A 2011 famine killed tens of thousands.¹⁷ In recent years it has also become a haven for two groups that can threaten Western interests—the extremist al-Shabab militia and bands of pirates traverse the ocean waters off Somalia's coast looking for booty, occasionally killing innocent seafarers in the process. The Obama administration inherited this set of problems and has not taken major steps to address them. An African Union peacekeeping mission exists in Somalia, made up primarily of Ugandan and Burundian soldiers, to try to strengthen the country's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) as it seeks to extend control within and beyond the capital city of Mogadishu. But the international effort remains under-resourced and the U.S. role minimal. Total troop strength has gradually grown from about 5,000 in early 2009 to almost 10,000 by 2011. But part of this was natural growth

for a mission that began only in 2007, and current troop levels remain below the UN-approved expansion of the force to 12,000 or the goal of 20,000 promoted by some African governments. Funds for salaries for the mission are sometimes in short supply as well.¹⁸ Total troop rosters for the TFG are around 10,000 Somali fighters, perhaps, but as salaries are rarely paid, actual fighting strength is typically far less. U.S. direct monetary assistance to Somalia has declined from the levels of the later Bush years. (Funding in 2008 and 2009 averaged about \$300 million a year; funding under Obama has been about \$100 million annually.)¹⁹

All is not lost in Somalia, however. The piracy problem has declined somewhat in 2012 due to better patrolling in the nearby waterways by an international armada. Within Somalia, UN forces have indeed made some headway and the roles of neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya have increased, possibly for the better. The regions of Somaliland and Puntland in the north are reasonably effective, stable, and autonomous. Some have suggested that, as an alternative to trying to recreate a strong central state, working with more local autonomous actors—particularly the less corrupt ones—could be a preferable alternative.²⁰ It may also be possible to prod the TFG government, seen by many Somalis as an Ethiopian proxy, to increase its domestic legitimacy by working cooperatively with some insurgents other than the core of the al-Shabab movement.²¹

Regardless, the current under-resourced effort has not been a success for the Obama administration. As with the DRC and Sudan, it would be unfair to

describe Somalia's difficulties as a failure specific to Obama policy. However, one cannot avoid the conclusion that a president who, as a senator, cared deeply about this part of the world and who, as a presidential candidate, talked in 2007 and 2008 about the problem of weak states as central to his vision for future global security has no particular accomplishments under his belt in these areas as his first term nears completion.

Meanwhile, new problems are erupting or

worsening in countries like Mali and Nigeria, largely in the form of Ansar Dine and Boko Haram extremists.

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Mexico and Colombia

Closer to home, and even more directly consequential for U.S. national security policy, the Obama administration has made relatively few overtures toward Latin America. It began with considerable goodwill in the region and has not entirely lost that, but has not been associated yet with a major policy initiative

or accomplishment.²² Fortunately, the region is itself doing better. Almost all of South America has been growing faster than the global average over at least the last decade.²³ Democracy is thriving, especially in most of the larger and more important states—even as conflict remains severe, income inequality problematic, and crime serious in much of the region.²⁴ But progress is much more the result

of longstanding trends and actions by the leaders and peoples of the region than because of any recent U.S. initiative. And serious violence and crime remain direct threats to U.S. interests, especially in Mexico and Central America.

Early on, Secretary Clinton described the drug violence in Mexico as verging on an insurgency like that of Colombia's in previous times, a comparison that Mexico did not appreciate and that President Obama felt obliged to recant.²⁵ There were also serious difficulties in the relationship between Mexican President Felipe Calderon and Obama's first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, culminating in the ambassador's departure in early 2011. Mexican domestic violence has reached extraordinarily high levels, with roughly 20,000 individuals a year losing their lives due to drug-related violence and criminality. The drug trade is fueled by U.S. demand, and the killing occurs quite often with American guns. These are issues that the Obama administration has been unable to address through any significant domestic legislation.²⁶ Even though Mexico has captured or killed at least 21 of a list of 37 top drug kingpins since 2009, the rate of violence has not yet declined.²⁷

U.S.–Mexico trade has increased in recent decades, from less than \$100 billion a year before NAFTA entered into force in 1994 to \$350 billion in 2008, including a large volume of Mexican oil exports to the United States. However, Mexico has experienced a decade of mediocre growth, and the recent recession only punctuated what had become a disturbing stagnation in its economic trajectory.²⁸ Under Obama, there has been no major initiative on trade relations of the type that he promoted on the campaign trail (a revised NAFTA) or of immigration reform within the United States, which might regularize the process whereby more Mexican immigrants send remittances back home.²⁹ The only noteworthy mitigating accomplishment was probably the overdue accord to allow Mexican trucks to cross into the United States (rather than transfer their cargo to American vehicles at the border), and vice versa.³⁰

Plan Merida, from the George W. Bush years, is the U.S. response to the drug violence and criminality afflicting Mexico. It calls for support for Mexico's security forces and other instruments of law and order. The Obama administration has sustained it, and in fact injected a large funding boost in

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2010, temporarily raising annual aid by more than \$300 million.³¹ But overall, current U.S. efforts with Mexico appear relatively weak, with few major initiatives or breakthroughs on matters ranging from gun control to immigration policy to trade to border security. And Mexico's existing strategy for countering violence and criminality appears quite troubled. Something akin to a robust counterinsurgency strategy may be needed, even if it is not called that, with primary effort and resources coming from Mexicans themselves, but with a more substantial amount of U.S. assistance for several years as well. It would be somewhat analogous to what has happened in Iraq and Afghanistan, though perhaps more similar to recent efforts in Colombia. That means reform and better support for the army, police, judiciary, and intelligence services.³² Efforts to date have been limited in scale and scope; one hopes the new Mexican president, to be inaugurated later this fall, can usher in a more productive approach. To do so, he will need an engaged American partner.³³

There has been, by contrast, little need for a new bold initiative on Colombia, given how much progress that country has made in recent years. Most of the credit goes to Colombia itself, notably to its previous leader, President Alvaro Uribe (2002–2010).³⁴ But the United States has played a strong supporting role over the last two administrations through security assistance, arms transfers, intelligence cooperation, and other support.³⁵

Colombia still has a long way to go, however, and the United States has an important ongoing role to play. Washington finally came through on ratification of the U.S.–Colombia free trade accord (FTA), which was ratified in October 2011. An aid package that increased economic aid at least modestly might also help President Juan Manuel Santos improve governance, take on land reform, and otherwise increase Colombia's emphasis on economics, development, and human rights to complement the successful but primarily security-oriented Uribe legacy.³⁶ Instead, overall aid totals have slipped under Obama, and there has been no major new initiative.³⁷

What about Systemic Improvements?

In sum, the Obama administration has not achieved many signature accomplishments to date regarding key conflict-ridden states, particularly not the five crucial cases considered here. But have there been any broader policy changes that might prepare the United States and international community to respond more effectively to these kinds of challenges in the future?

The short answer would appear to be no. Various things could have been done: the administration could have promoted beefing up UN capacities for mediation in advance of conflicts; created planning cells at NATO, the African Union, and the United Nations for possible peace operations missions; and

created a standing deployable headquarters of international civil–military experts to run missions. It could have substantially expanded the fledgling capabilities within the State Department for related purposes—the Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization, the Office of Transitional Initiatives, or related mechanisms—but there has only been modest growth in size and funding for these capabilities.³⁸ It could have promoted a major expansion of the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), by which the United States helps train potential peacekeepers in other countries. Perhaps GPOI could have gone beyond previous approaches to include transfers of major military equipment, including weaponry³⁹—instead Obama has only sustained ongoing efforts from the Bush administration.

In these areas, Obama has achieved no breakthroughs. That does not mean his administration's efforts have been nonexistent, only that they have been more incrementalist than visionary. The administration did provide increased funds to repay arrears at the United Nations in peace operations accounts, adding several hundred million dollars in 2009 to an annual contribution that now typically exceeds \$2 billion.⁴⁰ It has also made a number of practical improvements in how the interagency process is coordinated for dealing with complex operations abroad.⁴¹ It responded vigorously to the 2010 Haiti earthquake, as well as the 2010 floods in Pakistan.⁴² But it did not break major new ground.

Is Big Vision Possible?

On what might be loosely called the “soft security agenda,” Barack Obama campaigned as a candidate of transformation. His vision for foreign policy included a fervent desire to address the problems of international poverty, state weakness, civil conflict, and crime. For Obama, these were both humanitarian concerns and major security concerns for the United States itself—especially when the foreign countries in question include neighbors like Colombia and Mexico. On the campaign trail, for example in his major Woodrow Wilson Center speech in the summer of 2007 and his Berlin speech in the summer of 2008, Obama promised things like doubling foreign aid, major presidential attention and action regarding states like Sudan and the DRC, and a more cooperative and sympathetic approach in which new powers would be treated with greater respect and accorded greater roles in the key decisions of the international community.

Obama has made only modest headway on this agenda. His administration has been fundamentally cautious on matters such as the civil wars in Africa, the stability of Mexico, and the multilateral military and police capacity available to handle future security challenges. There have been useful steps here and there, and no great new tragedies on his watch, but on balance, Obama has

not accomplished more than other recent U.S. presidents when dealing with this set of problems.

Why is this so? At one level, there is little mystery. Few U.S. presidents make big headway on the agenda considered here, as it tends to be seen as secondary in importance. In Obama's case, the administration's inbox on more immediate and acute national security challenges has been overflowing. The nation's economic problems have presented huge obstacles to any possible trade or aid initiatives. Domestic political discord has hamstrung action on issues like immigration and gun control which might have contributed to more comprehensive Mexico policy.

But at a broader level, those who support greater attention to weak and failing states should not give up. In a second term, or the first term of a new Republican

president, specific actions on most of these challenging cases will be easier to imagine and consider. U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan will make it possible to consider sending a training brigade to the DRC or South Sudan. Greater attention to Latin America from the president's bully pulpit should make it possible to promote a new, targeted aid package for both Colombia and Mexico (and key parts of Central America) on national security grounds, as the agenda should be slightly less packed with

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other priorities by then (one hopes), and the problems in Mexico in particular harder to ignore. Bolder action to create greater peacekeeping capacity among developing countries, through mechanisms like the GPOI, can ensure that in most of these kinds of cases, America's role will remain limited and indirect—even if substantially more muscular than it has been.

My colleague Robert Kagan points out that many presidents make their real foreign policy legacy in their second term. That is when Reagan worked with Gorbachev to end the Cold War, for example, and when Clinton succeeded quickly in Kosovo by contrast with his tougher earlier experiences in Somalia, Haiti, and for several years Bosnia. If reelected, Barack Obama will have a chance to connect the idealism that he so palpably exuded in 2006 through early 2009 with the pragmatism and reluctant realism that has characterized most of his presidency to date in pursuit of such a legacy. And how he handles the cases of weak or otherwise challenged states can still play a central role in the narrative. Indeed, with Obama's own worldview and interpretation of the nature of the national security challenges of our day, it is actually imperative that he finds a way to make this happen.

Nor is there any reason to give up on a President Romney on this set of issues. While they have not been central to his campaign, his personal background and his strong faith suggest that the agenda would be important to him, too. Mexico and other points south clearly matter on national security grounds as well, for both men, and have been neglected by America for too long.

Either man would, unless conflict involving large numbers of American forces erupts in Syria or Iran, have the benefit of a major downsizing of U.S. forces in the wars of the last decade. That will free up military capacity within the most battle-hardened competent counterinsurgency force in the history of the planet. To be sure, American forces need a rest and deserve a break, and in the countries of Latin America, they would generally not be wanted in large numbers in any case. But much can be done with modest and indirect approaches in the conflict zones, in terms of troops, trainers, intelligence operatives, special forces, and technical as well as financial assistance. It is time to start thinking about what an actionable agenda would look like in the upcoming presidential term, whoever might sit in the Oval office.

It is time to start thinking about what an actionable agenda on failing states would look like.

Notes

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