

The Paradox in Obama's Foreign Policy

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The president's legacy will be evaluated on his foreign policy accomplishments, not just the errors he believes he has avoided.

In his brief treatment of international affairs in Tuesday's State of the Union address, President Barack Obama offered essentially two assertions about his foreign policy: It is not reactive, nor is it one-dimensional. Yet this was more of an unwitting self-critique than the defense he intended. Both principles are undeniably sound, but the Obama administration has not practiced them; paradoxically, they are two of the major flaws in how the U.S. has recently conducted foreign affairs.

There is no clearer sign of the reactive nature of U.S. foreign policy than the near-absence from the speech of the "rebalancing" to Asia -- the intended centerpiece of Mr. Obama's foreign policy -- or of other early-term priorities such as Israeli-Palestinian peace or improved relations with Russia.

Instead, the administration's policies overseas have been dictated by events it failed to anticipate or chose to ignore. The Arab uprisings, for example, followed the demotion of economic and political reform as U.S. priorities in the Middle East; the Ukraine crisis was preceded by an unrealistic assessment of Russian priorities and intentions; and the spread of the Islamic State and subsequent U.S. actions to stem it followed years of inaction in Syria and Iraq fatigue.

These are not cause-and-effect relationships, to be sure, but they nevertheless reflect a lack of strategic planning and an increasing tendency to view foreign affairs first through the lens of U.S. domestic politics rather than analysis of the facts and how they affect American interests. A greater emphasis on anticipating and preventing conflicts and crises -- rather than scrambling to mitigate them once they have begun -- is critical if we are to chart a steadier course and truly avoid a reactive foreign policy.

We have also fallen short when it comes to deploying multiple elements of power in support of clear strategies and goals. In Syria, after several years of hesitating to use military power to complement Western diplomacy, U.S. policy

is now focused solely on carrying out airstrikes against ISIS and other terrorist groups. This campaign has not been particularly successful, partly because it is not tethered to a broader strategy to stabilize Syria and end the civil war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions.

On Iran, the U.S. has focused on the nuclear issue to the exclusion of other concerns raised by Tehran's actions, and it has neglected to complement engagement with other tactics. Rather than merely hoping that a nuclear deal would yield ancillary benefits for bilateral relations, U.S. policymakers need to prepare realistically to cope with an empowered Tehran and disgruntled allies in the wake of an agreement. As with Cuba, it is one thing to use engagement to support a policy -- and another thing altogether to mistake it for a policy.

President Obama entered office preaching engagement, but the widespread perception around the world is of U.S. disengagement. Now that the president has laid out a trade agenda, will he use his influence to build support for it, particularly within his own party? Having stood up to Russia, will he exercise American leadership to help Ukraine and strengthen NATO? Having threatened to veto new sanctions, will he work with Congress to craft an Iran policy that reflects bipartisan concerns? The president's legacy will be evaluated on his foreign policy accomplishments -- not just the errors he believes he has avoided.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal's "Think Tank" blog

[\(http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/01/22/the-paradox-in-obamas-foreign-policy/\)](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/01/22/the-paradox-in-obamas-foreign-policy/). ❖

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