

Why Risk Can Be a Good Thing in Foreign Policy

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Much has been made of President Barack Obama's recent admission that he didn't "have a strategy yet" on Syria. With the president scheduled to address the nation Wednesday night about the Islamic State insurgency, the White House appears to be seeking to quash the debate about whether Mr. Obama's risk-averse, ponderous approach to foreign policy is wise or foolish.

But that is the wrong question. Caution is not inherently good or bad, nor is risk. As in poker or football, the cautious approach may be the surest bet for any given circumstance. But it's hard to compile a winning record without the occasional, well-chosen risky move. The trick is knowing when to take risks, as foreign-policy choices are rarely clear-cut.

Today, for example, few would argue with the decision to go after Osama bin Laden in 2011 or to strike a Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007. Yet beforehand, behind closed doors, policymakers reportedly debated both moves fiercely. Pundits love maxims such as "military action should always be a last resort," but they are useless to practitioners; as these examples show, early action is sometimes highly effective, though if used too liberally it can add up to an overly aggressive and risky posture. In any event, it is rarely clear when one has reached "the last resort," except in hindsight.

This uncertainty does not mean that foreign policy boils down to only a president's judgment. Foreign policy tends to be in the headlines when crises erupt, by which time options are often limited and lousy. A president's foreign policy is not just about how he responds to crises but what he does before such eruptions in terms of strategic planning, shoe-leather diplomacy and other work. Last week's NATO summit was important; but arguably last year's summit and those that came before -- most of which attracted scant attention -- were equally or more important because they left NATO ill-prepared for the Ukraine crisis.

Much like running a marathon, whether a foreign-policy option is risky or "stupid" depends in part on whether and how one has prepared for it. Why, for example, is the need to vet the Syrian opposition still raised as an obstacle when we have had three years to study the actors in that conflict? Our adversaries aren't idle. Many have treated the Islamic State's successes as a bolt from the blue, but the militants were using those same years to prepare the battlefield in Iraq, as Michael Knights recently wrote.

In this sense, foreign policy is not a virtuoso activity but a matter of leadership and management. A president cannot know whether the next crisis will erupt in Africa, the South China Sea or elsewhere, and even if he did he could not personally manage these policy processes. He must set the tone, provide the strategic vision, and empower his bureaucracy. But because bureaucracies tend to be risk-averse, they need to be constantly prodded to challenge assumptions, bring information forward, and produce ideas. In the absence of such leadership, mantras such as "don't do stupid stuff" reinforce that risk aversion and tend to be translated simply as "don't do stuff." ❖

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