

Obama the Pragmatist

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The president's approach to recent crises shows an emphasis on the feasibility of successfully intervening, so he may yet decide to take action in Syria if his assessment of the stakes changes.

Vladimir Putin defines power in the old-fashioned way: If former Soviet republics with ethnic Russian minorities don't toe his line, he will either exploit separatist movements or simply move militarily to reincorporate these areas into Russia. Transnistria, Abkhazia and now Crimea are testimony to the Putin doctrine -- and he does not let international norms or even international agreements Russia has signed get in the way.

In responding to such an undisguised military aggression, both "idealists" and "realists" would feel compelled to impose a cost for such behavior. Idealists because an international norm is being violated, and collective security requires that such norms must not be violated with impunity. Realists because if we fail to impose a cost, Putin may not stop only in Crimea, and deterrence requires that Russia's leader must understand he will pay a price.

President Obama is now acting to mobilize a set of diplomatic and economic consequences. Is he doing so out of idealist or realist impulses? I, for one, don't know that any American president can ever be neatly characterized as a realist or idealist in foreign policy. George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda" would certainly put him in the idealist category, yet he recognized limits and did not apply it to Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, given U.S. interests in stability in the oil-rich kingdom and our need for Pakistani cooperation on Afghanistan and fighting terror more generally. Obama's hesitancy to intervene in Syria leads many, including Fred Kaplan, to conclude that he is a traditional realist. And there is much in [Kaplan's article \(http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/barack-obama-realist-foreign-policy-103861.html#.UxYO1oWmU5R\)](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/barack-obama-realist-foreign-policy-103861.html#.UxYO1oWmU5R) that supports his conclusion; I am sure if he were writing it now, he would seek to explain the president's response to Putin's move in Ukraine as one guided by realism.

But Obama, like his predecessors, cannot be characterized in such exclusive terms. When the president called for Egypt's Hosni Mubarak to leave office, seeing him on the wrong side of the forces of history represented in Tahrir

Square, that was not the position of a realist. Similarly, President Obama's intervention in Libya was driven very heavily by humanitarian instincts. It is true, as Kaplan says, that there was a division on whether we should intervene, but it was not between those who said go in heavy or not at all. I was a participant in those debates, and there were those who argued that we had no vital interests and should not intervene; those who argued that we could not allow a massacre to take place in Benghazi when we had the means to prevent it; and those who argued that we had moral and practical reasons to intervene -- particularly given the consequences of mass killings that would trigger a flood of Libyan refugees into Egypt and Tunisia at a time when both were in the early stages of their transitions.

The president opted to intervene while also deciding to manage our intervention in a way designed to keep it limited in kind, scope and responsibility. In explaining his decision, he spoke of Muammar al-Qaddafi's brutality and "a looming humanitarian crisis." "To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and -- more profoundly -- our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are," Obama said. "Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different." Those are not the words of a realist -- one who sees humanitarian interventions as moral crusades that drain American blood and treasure and make us less capable of intervening where our interests demand it.

So how does one square these words with the president's reluctance to intervene in Syria, where there is not a looming humanitarian crisis but an existing humanitarian catastrophe that shows no sign of ending? Here Kaplan is closer to the truth. I would say that what guides Obama in his decision-making on interventions as much as anything is feasibility. Can we succeed at an acceptable cost? Can we limit our involvement? Do we have an exit strategy? Clearly, like any president, he has to evaluate those costs against what we have at stake. Those who tend toward realism evaluate stakes one way, and those who tend toward idealism evaluate them differently.

But decision-making does not take place in a vacuum. Context and legacy matter. Two wars, trillions of dollars spent and thousands of casualties for outcomes that the American public now question undoubtedly affect Obama's calculus. No wonder that feasibility and the nature of the threat to us weigh heavily on him.

The problem, of course, is that it is always easier to measure the costs of action -- they seem concrete and immediate. The costs of inaction are almost always more theoretical and abstract. Having stated that there will be consequences for Russian aggression in Crimea and Ukraine, the president understands that the costs of doing nothing would be high, and we must now demonstrate the meaning of those words -- even if that does not translate into military action.

In Syria, the costs of inaction always inclined me to favor a more activist approach for both moral and strategic reasons. When 40 percent of the Syrian population can be displaced and Bashar al-Assad can target and starve non-combatants as a deliberate policy with essentially no consequence, "never again" and "responsibility to protect" look to be little more than slogans. Strategically, as long as Assad remains in Syria, he will be a magnet for every jihadi worldwide. It is only a matter of time before jihadi bases in a fragmented Syria will use their presence to attack not just Assad but U.S. interests, friends and even our homeland. While our options may not be good today, the landscape and our choices have consistently become worse over time -- and Obama, who takes the responsibility to protect the United States very seriously, will, I suspect, at some point evaluate feasibility and stakes differently over the coming months. Will our actions then be driven by idealism or realism -- or both?

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He served as special assistant to President Obama from 2009 to 2011. ❖

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