

# Thoughts on the SOTU's Foreign Policy

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## Michael Singh discusses the foreign policy implications of President Obama's 2010 State of the Union address.

I agree with my colleague Peter Feaver that the president's State of the Union address focused predominantly on domestic policy. This is unsurprising, however, given the economic and other domestic challenges faced by the United States and President Obama's preoccupation with those challenges since assuming office. Nevertheless, I believe that the 2011 State of the Union address demonstrated an evolution in the Obama administration's foreign policy focus. The president's first State of the Union address in 2009 dealt briefly with Iraq (reaffirming the U.S. intention to depart), Afghanistan and Pakistan (announcing a review of strategy to "defeat al Qaeda and combat extremism"), and the Guantanamo Bay detention center (promising to close it). He also announced a "new era of engagement," stressing the United States' need for help in addressing the world's problems and the world's need for U.S. leadership. All in all, about 400 words were devoted to foreign policy.

The 2010 State of the Union address reprised the 2009 themes (save Gitmo), while including a fuller discussion of nuclear nonproliferation and brief references to Iran and North Korea. The discussion of Iraq and Afghanistan was also meatier. While in 2009 the president said only that he would "announce a way forward in Iraq that leaves Iraq to its people and responsibly ends [the] war," in 2010 he spoke of "partner[ing] with the Iraqi people to promote regional peace and prosperity." While in 2009 his discussion of Afghanistan was limited to mentioning the strategy review and the need to defeat al Qaeda and deny it safehavens, in 2010 he repeated those themes, but also spoke of training Afghan forces, encouraging good governance, combating corruption, and other elements of U.S. policy. And his discussion of "engagement" shifted subtly to focus more on U.S. leadership.

In 2011, these shifts continued, though the foreign policy portion of this year's State of the Union is startlingly similar -- in themes, structure, and length -- to that in 2010 speech. The 2011 version evinces a greater willingness to speak frankly about our foes: the Taliban are mentioned for the first time, and the president referred to the "Iranian Government" rather than the "Islamic Republic of Iran," the latter a phrase which in previous remarks was

intended to convey respectfulness and signal our pacific intent. Other areas of the world get their first mention -- India and Brazil, for example. The president reaffirmed his support for the "democratic aspirations of all people," continuing a theme from his most recent U.N. General Assembly speech and Secretary Clinton's speech earlier this month at the Forum for the Future. Unlike in those instances, however, this time the president lent specific support to democracy activists in Tunisia. And crucially, the president strongly asserted his belief in U.S. virtues, values, and leadership, which underpin our global influence and ambitions.

So yes, the speech is short on discussion of foreign policy, contains plenty of gloss (like all State of the Union speeches), omits important issues (like long-term strategies for Iraq and Afghanistan, and Egypt and Lebanon, both gripped by crises), and falls short on defense spending. But it suggests a continued movement away from feel-good foreign-policy slogans (such as 2009's "new era of engagement") and criticism of the previous administration, toward a greater willingness to take sides, focus on vital interests rather than trendy issues, and delve into the complexities and nitty-gritty of policy.

To be sure, there is a long way to go. President Obama has yet to articulate a bold foreign policy vision, and instead continues to take an issue-by-issue approach bound together by unobjectionable, but relatively insubstantial references to "engagement." Campaign rhetoric aside, the United States has been engaged multilaterally in international affairs since at least World War II, and will be for the foreseeable future. It may be that the president believes that restoring the United States' competitive edge -- through economic growth, education, investment in R&D and infrastructure, etc. -- is itself something of a foreign-policy strategy in a globalized world. But while such measures are necessary for maintaining and enhancing U.S. prosperity and leading international role, they do not address how we utilize that role. That is the question that in my view remains unanswered, and which we see the U.S. currently shying away from in places like Egypt. It is unquestionably good that we reaffirm U.S. leadership and influence, but it is not sufficient. Eventually the president must lay out to what end and on whose behalf we will exercise our leadership and wield our influence.

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