

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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A Foreign Policy Crisis in America: Russia, the Middle East and the Obama Administration

Robert Kagan, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, recently wrote that “the willingness of the United States to use force to defend its interests and the liberal world order has been an essential and unavoidable part of sustaining the world order since World War II. It is also an essential part of effective diplomacy . . . The question today is finding the right balance between when to use force and when not to.” Has President Obama found that right balance? Most major analysts are skeptical that he has. Perhaps foreign editor of the German newspaper, *Die Welt*, Clemens Wergin, has captured the essence of Obama’s approach to foreign policy: “While Mr. Obama’s new style of diplomacy—soft power and nonintervention—was at first seen as a welcome break with the Bush years, five years later a dismal realization has set in. It turns out that soft power cannot replace hard power. On the contrary, soft power is merely a complementary foreign policy tool that can yield results only when it is backed up by real might and the political will to employ it if necessary . . . Because if America stays out of the fray, there are many others who will fill the void: Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, Iran, Russia; the list of actors and countries that are actively pushing against European and American interests, and getting away with it, grows even longer.” How did this occur? What has been happening over the last five years that has produced this problematic situation for the world?

When President Obama took office, he made clear that foreign policy for the US was going to change. His strategy was to gradually withdraw from Europe and the Middle East, because America must focus on “nation-building at home.” Further, he posited a “pivot to Asia,” a region that had been neglected by the US and desperately needed US military and diplomatic attention. He stated, “Here we see the future.” Fred Hiatt, editorial page editor for the *Washington Post*, summarizes the action points of Obama’s foreign policy over the last five years:

- All US troops were withdrawn from Iraq. Despite the tension with the al-Maliki government, Obama did not push for American troop presence and was clearly content with the zero option, believing that Iraq’s prospects for stability were good without American presence.
- As Syria descended into civil war, Obama determined that the risks of providing air support, weapons or training moderate rebels outweighed any potential gains. In fact, he confidently predicted the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad.

- After bombing Libyan forces to depose Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, Obama declined to send trainers or other support to the new Libyan government.
- When Syria's Assad gassed 1,400 Syrian civilians to death, Obama declared that Assad had violated civilized norms and crossed his (i.e., Obama's) red line. He asked for Congress to approve a military response, but quickly shelved that request in favor of a deal, brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, for Assad to hand over all of his chemical weapons.
- Therefore, with all of these decisions, "Obama's determination to gear down in Europe and the Middle East, regardless of circumstances, guaranteed that the United States would not respond strategically to new opportunities (e.g., the Arab Spring) or dangers (e.g., Putin's determination to redraw the map of Europe)." To be specific, as the Arab Spring unfolded and Middle Eastern people began demanding more democratic participation and freedoms, governments changed and hope for real change mounted. But the US had disengaged from the Middle East. Hiatt suggests that "if the United States had taken the lead, Europe and America together could have offered trade, investment, exchange and cultural opportunities to help bring the region into the modern, democratic world. But for Obama the tumult in Egypt and elsewhere was a distraction, not a once-in-a-generation opportunity. The West responded timidly and inconsistently, and the moment was lost."
- Consider developments in Russia: Obama and his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, argued for a "reset" strategy with Russia. But, when it became obvious that Putin was not interested, the West had no strategic response. [Putin's goal is to re-create the Russian empire founded on an autocratic state linked with the Russian Orthodox Church.] Hiatt: "Obama could have bolstered a unified Europe with military, diplomatic and trade measures. Instead, as Putin wrecked democracy in Russia, annexed Crimea and fomented war in Ukraine, Obama and his European counterparts were reactive and divided."
- His policy in Iraq has been a disaster. Obama's generals adamantly argued for 15,000 troops to remain in Iraq for training and counterterrorism purposes. But the US totally withdrew and the result is that the US has no leverage and radical terrorists have seized the central part of the country. Further, with Obama's refusal to even help the moderates in the Syrian civil war, they are in retreat, Assad's position has somewhat improved, while the radical Islamic extremists (ISIS) are now governing sections of both Syria and Iraq.
- Finally, even in Asia (remember the "pivot"), allied leaders there express deep doubts about US commitment—and the reason they cite is Obama's "red line" debacle in Syria.

Obama's foreign policy has been a veritable disaster and the US position in the world is weakened by its loss of credibility. This is especially acute because the world order that emerged after the end of the Cold War is disintegrating. A new, chaotic, Post-Cold War world is emerging and the US is not effectively leading in this chaotic era. Obama's disengagement from Europe and his infamous "pivot to Asia" have ended up serving neither continent well. Furthermore, the basic structure and order of the Middle East that was a product of both World War I (the Sykes-Picot Agreement) and World War II (the end of both the British and French Mandates in the Middle East) are also coming apart—and no one is certain what the new order will look like. With the US so disengaged in the region, we have lost almost all significant influence in the region. (Witness the current Hamas-Israeli conflict. Neither side is really taking the US seriously.) A new world order is coming together before our eyes, and America's diminished role is part of the problem, not the solution.

Recently, the *Wall Street Journal* editorially observed that "The greatest foreign-policy failing of this Presidency is that he refuses to see that the world has bad actors . . . [H]e refuses to admit or explain that certain countries are responsible for the consequences [of aggression] and must be opposed." Currently, the US, under President Obama, no longer has the will or the credibility to give moral leadership to the world.

See editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (19-20 July 2014); Peter Baker, "Crises Cascade and Converge, Testing Obama," in [www.nytimes](http://www.nytimes.com) (23 July 2014); Fred Hiatt, "Obama's Foreign Policy Reveals the Effects of Disengagement," in www.washingtonpost.com (28 July 2014); Clemens Wergin, "America's European President," *Wall Street Journal* (9 July 2014); and Robert Kagan, "US Needs a Discussion on When, Not Whether, to Use Force," in www.washingtonpost.com (16 July 2014).