The decade since September 11 has seen two competing US foreign policy visions. George W. Bush’s response to the attack was to declare a global war on terrorism. Convinced that the United States faced an existential threat abetted by other states and optimistic about the capacity of American power to reshape the world, the United States went on the offensive. In Afghanistan, it fought to kill or capture Al-Qaeda fighters and their supporters. In Iraq, it fought to break the nexus of terrorists, tyrants and technologies of mass destruction. But the Iraq war produced something Bush had not anticipated—a protracted and bloody occupation that demonstrated the limits of American power. Criticism of US foreign policy soared, both at home and abroad.

Barack Obama tapped into the American public’s disillusionment over Iraq and US foreign policy more generally by rejecting the core principles of Bush’s worldview. In his analysis, Bush had failed to see how globalization had remade world politics. It had dispersed power around the globe and created a whole host of new problems, of which terrorism was just one, that transcended borders. Great military power had limited utility in such an environment, and the United States could not go it alone. It needed partners to achieve its goals and protect its interests. And those partners could be won over only through diplomatic engagement, not intimidation.

For all the differences between Bush and Obama, however, the two shared a common trait: a conviction that other countries both wanted and needed US leadership. This conviction reflected America’s more than half a century of success as the global superpower. US leadership had been essential to everything from creating the United Nations to leading the world in liberating Kuwait. US global leadership was not a boast but a reality.

Yet even as Obama pledged to begin ‘renewing American leadership’, the very trend he cited to criticize Bush’s foreign policy—globalization—was at the least complicate his efforts and at the worst undermining them. As Obama discovered during his first two years in office, kind words, an open hand and a willingness to listen did not guarantee cooperation, let alone foreign policy success. His hoped-for partners often disagreed on the nature of the problem, what constituted
the proper solution and who should bear the burden of implementing it. They had their own interests and priorities, and often they were not looking to Washington for direction.

How to succeed in a world in which other countries are increasingly ignoring or contesting American leadership rather than embracing it is the overriding challenge facing the United States in the years to come. As Obama rightly notes, much of what he or any US president wants to achieve overseas requires the cooperation of others. But how can that cooperation best be achieved? The temptation is to cling to past ways of doing business. Changing strategies, revising priorities and revamping missions is politically painful and potentially dangerous. But a foreign policy that ignores how much the global environment has changed will yield frustration far more than accomplishment.

The war on terror

George W. Bush did not set out to remake US foreign policy. When he declared his candidacy for the presidency in 1999 domestic issues topped the political agenda; foreign policy was an afterthought for most Americans. Bush naturally looked inward rather than outward during the 2000 campaign and his first eight months in office. Neither Al-Qaeda specifically nor terrorism more broadly figured prominently when he did turn to foreign policy.

September 11 changed that calculation and with it the direction of American foreign policy. Fighting terrorism became not just a priority, but the priority. Bush saw September 11 not just as a horrific act but as the manifestation of an existential threat on a par with those posed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This was not an ordinary geopolitical clash, but rather a struggle between good and evil that affected all the world’s nations. As he told mourners at a national prayer service three days after the attacks: ‘Our responsibility to history is clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil’.4

Bush’s diagnosis of the threat led inexorably to a policy prescription: a ‘war on terrorism’.5 Both nouns in that formulation were significant. The United States would not react defensively by relying on law enforcement and passive measures like more guards, guns and gates to protect itself; instead, it would go on the offensive. As he told his advisers, ‘We need to fight overseas by bringing the war to the bad guys’.6 The target would go beyond Al-Qaeda to include all global terrorists and the states that supported them. In the words of what became known

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3 See Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, America unbound: the Bush revolution in foreign policy (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), ch. 5.
as the Bush Doctrine, ‘We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them’.7

Bush’s war on terrorism rested on five assumptions. First, America’s global dominance, and especially its military dominance, gave it an unprecedented ability to take the fight overseas.8 Second, Washington’s reluctance to respond militarily to terrorist attacks over the previous two decades had encouraged Al-Qaeda and its ilk. Vice-President Dick Cheney argued this point frequently and forcefully: ‘Weakness, vacillation, and the unwillingness of the United States to stand with our friends—that is provocative. It encouraged people like Osama bin Laden … to launch repeated strikes against the United States, our people overseas and here at home, with the view that he could, in fact, do so with impunity’.9

Third, the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment would not work with terrorists.10 Threats to retaliate mean nothing to groups with no territory to defend. That conclusion was ominous, given the fear that the next terrorist attack might dwarf September 11 in scope. The anthrax attacks of autumn 2001 raised the spectre of large-scale biological terrorism. Intelligence reports suggested that Al-Qaeda might be able to build radiological (‘dirty’) bombs, if not acquire a nuclear weapon. The United States no longer had the luxury of absorbing an attack and then responding. It had to be prepared to act pre-emptively.11

Fourth, terrorists could not operate without state support. Bush made this point explicitly in his 2002 State of the Union Address: Iran, Iraq, North Korea ‘and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil’. States hostile to the United States might equip terrorists with weapons of mass destruction. That made the war on terrorism indistinguishable from the effort to stop rogue regimes. Indeed, within a few short paragraphs of identifying the ‘axis of evil’, Bush vowed that ‘the United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons’.12

Fifth, alliances and multilateral organizations might occasionally help the United States wage its war on terrorism, but they were not essential. The United States could accomplish what it needed to do militarily without allied help, and it should not let other states dictate what it could do. ‘At some point we may be the only ones left,’ Bush conceded. ‘That’s okay with me. We are America’.13 Bush’s unilateralism had predated September 11, and it had greatly strained transatlantic
relations. But he and his advisers were convinced that, at the end of the day, because they were championing the interests of their friends (if not in the way those friends might have preferred) and not seeking advantage for themselves, allies would eventually rally to their side.

Bush’s war on terrorism had one significant consequence for American grand strategy: talk of Great Power conflict faded. During the campaign Bush had derided the Clinton administration for appeasing a rising China and indulging a corrupt Russia. Early in his presidency he seemed to be heading for confrontation with both countries. Yet when the National Security Strategy appeared in September 2002, things looked different: ‘Today, the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where Great Powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war. Today, the world’s Great Powers find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos’. Bush’s assessment that Great Power interests were more compatible than competitive gave him considerable leeway to exercise American power.

**A superpower’s limits**

The Bush Doctrine was applied first in Afghanistan. On 12 September 2001, the United Nations authorized ‘all necessary steps’ to respond to the previous day’s attacks. That same day, NATO for the first time in its history invoked article 5, obliging it to come to the defence of a member. Less than a week later, a near-unanimous US Congress authorized Bush ‘to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons’.

Students of counterfactual history will long speculate on how Bush’s foreign policy might have evolved had Afghanistan’s leader Mullah Omar handed over Osama bin Laden as the United States demanded. He didn’t, however, and the United States, joined by the forces of nearly 20 countries, attacked Afghanistan in October. Despite a slow start, the US-led forces routed the Taleban in relatively short order. By early December, the Taleban government had collapsed.

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14 For examples, see Daalder and Lindsay, *America unbound*, pp. 61–6.
19 Daalder and Lindsay, *America unbound*, p. 115.
Most US allies assumed Bush was pursuing an Afghanistan-only policy. He was, in fact, pursuing an Afghanistan-first strategy. With the Taliban toppled, his focus shifted to Iraq. His advisers had debated whether to invade Iraq immediately after September 11. Bush had decided against it as a first step, but Saddam Hussein embodied the convergence of Bush’s three fears—terrorism, tyrants and technologies of mass destruction. Although US intelligence agencies had not found any evidence linking Saddam Hussein to Al-Qaeda, Bush believed that he ‘would like nothing more than to use a terrorist network to attack and to kill and leave no fingerprints behind’. Given the stakes, the United States could not wait, as Condoleezza Rice put it, ‘for the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud’.

Bush’s decision, then, was not whether to go to war with Iraq but how to get there. Administration officials gave numerous speeches and interviews in the attempt to persuade Americans that Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability posed an unacceptable threat. The effort succeeded. In October 2002, the US Congress authorized war against Iraq. Bush sought a similar vote from the UN Security Council. He did so for instrumental reasons—a UN authorization would shore up domestic political support and put more pressure on Baghdad. He did not believe, however, that he needed the UN’s blessing to go to war. When that blessing didn’t come, the United States, with the support of a ‘coalition of the willing’ that in terms of troop contributions consisted primarily of Britain and to a lesser extent Australia and Poland, invaded Iraq in March 2003—over the strident objections of much of the rest of the world.

Baghdad fell even more rapidly than Kabul had, in less than four weeks. But celebrations of ‘mission accomplished’ proved premature. By summer 2003, an insurgency gripped much of Iraq. Bush attributed the problem to a failure to anticipate ‘the consequences of catastrophic success’. Planning for the postwar occupation had assumed that US forces would hand over power to the Iraqis after a few months. This reflected Bush’s ideological distaste for nation-building, which dated back to the campaign.

As the insurgency gained strength, the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) sought to find Iraq’s WMD. Despite the work of 1,400 people and an investment of more than US$1 billion, no nuclear, chemical or biological weapons were discovered. The head of the ISG told the US Senate that when it came to Iraq’s WMD programme ‘we were almost all wrong’. The war’s primary rationale was mistaken.

With no WMD to be found, Bush increasingly justified the war in terms of promoting democracy in Iraq and eventually the rest of the Arab world. Freedom

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22 Bush, ‘The President’s news conference with Prime Minister Tony Blair’.
had been a theme of Bush’s public comments dating back to his first campaign speech. It had not, however, previously been a priority. But it became an effective rhetorical device for blunting domestic critics. It diverted attention from the WMD question and forced opponents either to agree with him or to explain why they opposed spreading democracy.

In his second inaugural address, Bush pivoted away from the original Bush Doctrine and positioned democracy promotion as a leading goal of American foreign policy, declaring: ‘It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world’. Just weeks after the address, Secretary of State Rice cancelled a trip to Egypt in protest at the arrest of an Egyptian democracy activist. When Rice finally went to Cairo later that year she publicly told a gathering of Egyptian reformers, ‘All free nations will stand with you as you secure the blessings of your own liberty’.

Bush’s ‘freedom agenda’, however, soon hit problems. One was that the administration had no strategy to accomplish its lofty goal. Just weeks after the second inaugural address, Bush submitted a budget request that actually cut funds for the government’s democracy promotion efforts. A second problem was that democracy promotion often conflicted with other important US foreign policy goals, most notably countering terrorism. Many of the allies in the war on terror were autocracies. Demanding that they embrace democratic reform risked losing their cooperation on terrorism. A third problem was that democracy could produce governments hostile to US interests. That happened dramatically in early 2006 when Palestinians voted Hamas into power, an outcome the Bush administration had thought impossible. Not surprisingly, autocratic Arab governments suddenly held new appeal. During Rice’s January 2007 visit to Egypt, she dropped all public talk of democracy and instead stressed that the US ‘relationship with Egypt is an important strategic relation that we value greatly’.

By the end of Bush’s second term in office the limits to American power were showing. The United States could topple regimes with remarkable speed. It could not, however, easily snuff out insurgencies or rebuild broken governments. Despite expenditure of more than half a trillion dollars, US troops were still fighting in Iraq—and in 2007 Bush dispatched 20,000 additional US soldiers to try to curtail the violence there. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan the Taliban had regained the initiative, putting pressure on Hamid Karzai’s government and sparking violence across the border in Pakistan.

30 Daalder and Lindsay, America unbound, p. 198.
Flexing American muscles in Iraq and Afghanistan also had not produced the supplementary benefits that Bush had anticipated. Rather than being cowed by his threats, Iran and North Korea continued with their nuclear programmes—indeed, in 2006 Pyongyang tested its first atomic bomb. Allied leaders had not rallied around Bush’s leadership but rather had distanced themselves from it, in good part because their citizens opposed US policies. At home, the US government’s deficit topped US$500 billion, and a majority of Americans wanted out of Iraq. This was not what Bush had envisioned when he declared the war on terror.

The promise of transformation

Barack Obama in a way owed his political success to George W. Bush. Obama was an obscure Illinois state legislator when he used an anti-war rally in Chicago in October 2002 to denounce Bush’s march towards a ‘dumb war’. The speech became pivotal during the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination campaign. Hillary Clinton and other leading Democratic presidential candidates had voted for the war; Obama smartly argued that he had opposed it from the start, thereby distinguishing himself from the rest of the field. Although his formal foreign policy credentials were slim, he successfully argued that his better judgement trumped his opponent’s greater experience.

The argument was significant because, unlike eight years earlier, foreign policy figured prominently in the 2008 presidential campaign, especially during the Democratic primaries. Iraq was the banner issue. More than one in three Americans in the spring of 2008 saw it as the most important issue facing the country. Obama argued that ‘by refusing to end the war in Iraq President Bush is giving the terrorists what they really want … a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences’. Obama’s policy prescription was straightforward: he would withdraw all US troops within 16 months of his election. But in keeping with his 2002 claim that he wasn’t against all wars, just dumb ones, he pledged to send more US troops to Afghanistan, which he believed that the Bush administration had unjustifiably ignored.

Obama’s criticisms of Bush’s foreign policy did not turn on the question of goals or the propriety of an activist foreign policy. Obama’s vow to ‘protect the American people and to expand opportunity for the next generation’ could have been drawn from the speech of any US president during his lifetime. And like

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36 See James M. Lindsay, ‘National security, the electoral connection, and policy choice’, in Martin A. Levin, Daniel DiSalvo and Martin Shapiro, eds, Getting past no from Clinton to Bush to Obama (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
40 Obama, ‘Renewing American leadership’, p. 2.
Bush, Obama was an internationalist who favoured a robust US role overseas. He was not a non-interventionist calling for a retreat to Fortress America.

Obama’s criticisms instead flowed from a rejection of Bush’s view of how the world worked. Where Bush implicitly denied the claim that globalization was remaking world politics, Obama accepted it as a given. A globalized world had created a multitude of threats that crossed national borders. Terrorism was only the most visible on a list that included nuclear proliferation and climate change. American power, though vast, was insufficient to meet these challenges. In Obama’s words, ‘America cannot meet the threats of this century alone’.41

Obama argued that the United States could secure the partners it needed only if other countries agreed with where it was headed and how. The United States could no longer afford the Bush practice of ‘bullying other countries to ratify changes we hatch in isolation’.42 Obama pledged to abide by international rules on issues such as coercive interrogation and to return diplomacy to the forefront of US policy. He would tackle issues like climate change and revive the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. His diplomatic push would extend even to America’s enemies. To the consternation of his critics, and even some of his supporters, when asked during the campaign whether he would ‘be willing to meet separately, without precondition … with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that divides our countries’, he answered ‘yes’.43

Although Obama emphasized the importance of working with friend and foe alike, he insisted that he would act militarily where it made sense. Besides vowing to send more troops to Afghanistan, he insisted he would use drone strikes and Special Forces operations to attack inside Pakistan. In 2007 he said: ‘If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won’t act, we will’.44 Both Democrats and Republicans denounced the statement, with some arguing that he had ‘suggested invading Pakistan’.45

Obama’s enthusiasm for military action, however, stopped short of humanitarian intervention. He favoured withdrawing US troops from Iraq even if genocide was occurring. ‘Well, look,’ he said at one campaign stop, ‘if that’s the criteria by which we are making decisions on the deployment of US forces, then by that argument you would have three hundred thousand troops in the Congo right now, where millions have been slaughtered as a consequence of ethnic strife, which we haven’t done’. He added, ‘We would be deploying unilaterally and occupying the Sudan, which we haven’t done’.46

41 Obama, ‘Renewing American leadership’, p. 4.
42 Obama, ‘Renewing American leadership’, p. 11.
44 Barack Obama, ‘The war we need to win’.
46 Quoted in Ryan Lizza, ‘The consequentialist’, New Yorker, 2 May 2011, p. 46.
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Obama similarly shied away from embracing George W. Bush’s ‘freedom agenda’. In part, this reflected hard-nosed political calculation; Iraq had made democracy promotion toxic to many Americans. But it also reflected his assessment that democracy promotion exalted elections over what he considered the building blocks of democracy—security and economic opportunity. He noted privately that President Franklin Roosevelt’s famed ‘Four Freedoms’ speech had not mentioned elections at all.\(^{47}\) Mindful of FDR’s concern about freedom from want and fear, Obama proposed doubling the US foreign aid budget.

Obama’s reluctance to embrace humanitarian intervention and his coolness towards democracy promotion spurred discussion that he was a rare bird—a Democratic foreign policy realist. Obama’s own comments fuelled the debate. ‘The truth is’, he told Pennsylvania voters, ‘that my foreign policy is actually a return to the traditional bipartisan realistic policy of George Bush’s father, of John F. Kennedy, of, in some ways, Ronald Reagan’.\(^ {48}\) But a more accurate description of how Obama viewed foreign policy was pragmatism rather than realism. He wanted ‘a strategy no longer driven by ideology and politics but one that is based on a realistic assessment of the sobering facts on the ground and our interests in the region’.\(^ {49}\) He vowed to assess each problem on its merits, and then attempt to devise a solution.

Obama’s campaign vision for US foreign policy excited people both at home and overseas.\(^ {50}\) Exhausted after eight years of George W. Bush, they expected that the one-term Senator would, to borrow a popular verb, transform American foreign policy. The candidate himself sometimes got caught up in the optimism of what he would do. ‘The day I’m inaugurated, the country looks at itself differently. And don’t underestimate that power. Don’t underestimate that transformation’.\(^ {51}\)

Expectations meet reality

Obama began his presidency by methodically translating his campaign promises into deeds.\(^ {52}\) On his third day in office, he ordered the closure of the US detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, within a year and an end to coercive interrogations. In mid-February, he ordered 17,000 US troops sent to Afghanistan, an increase of nearly 50 per cent over the 36,000 US troops already there.\(^ {53}\) At the end of February, he ordered the withdrawal of all US combat troops from Iraq

\(^ {48}\) Quoted in Lizza, *The consequentialist*, p. 46.
\(^ {49}\) Quoted in Lizza, *The consequentialist*, p. 46.
by August 2010 and all remaining US troops by December 2011. In March he sent a videotaped greeting to Iran in honour of the Iranian New Year, saying that ‘my administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us’. In May, he told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel had to freeze all settlement construction. In June, the US House passed the cap-and-trade bill that Obama favoured to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Obama launched a slew of diplomatic initiatives, most notably overturning Bush policy in sending US officials to participate in international talks with Iran over its nuclear programme. He travelled widely to speak to foreign audiences, visiting 21 countries in 2009 alone—the most ambitious foreign travel schedule of any first-year president. In April, he promised cheering crowds in Prague ‘to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons’. In June, he spoke in Cairo of his desire ‘to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world’. In September, he told the UN General Assembly that he was seeking, ‘in word and deed, a new era of engagement with the world’.

Obama’s embrace of diplomacy made him popular abroad and revived America’s image around the globe. Expectations of what he would accomplish soared. He won the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. The prize committee mentioned no accomplishments in its award citation; instead, it celebrated him for giving the world’s people ‘hope for a better future’ with ‘his diplomacy … founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by the majority of the world’s population’.

Obama’s first 28 months in office did produce some notable accomplishments. In June 2010, the UN Security Council imposed new sanctions on Iran in a bid to curtail its budding nuclear programme. The move was significant not just...
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because it intensified pressure on Tehran but because it won the support of the two veto-wielding Security Council members that had previously resisted sanctions, China and Russia. Russian support reflected the success of Obama’s effort to ‘reset’ relations with Moscow.65 In September 2009, he revamped US missile defence policy, scrapping the long-range missile defence system that Bush had begun and the Russians opposed in favour of a system that relied on shorter-range interceptors that caused Moscow less alarm.66 That policy change enabled the signing and eventual ratification of the ‘New START’ treaty as well as facilitating Moscow’s cooperation in the passage of materiel through Central Asia to Afghanistan. In March 2011, Obama worked with Britain and France to secure Chinese and Russian cooperation at the Security Council once again, this time to pass a resolution authorizing action to protect Libyan civilians against attacks by Muammar Qadhafi’s forces.67

Obama succeeded on several core national security objectives as well. US combat troops left Iraq in August 2010 as promised, and the withdrawal of the remaining 50,000 non-combat troops was on schedule to be completed by the December 2011 deadline.68 He quintupled the number of strikes by armed drones against suspected terrorist hideouts in Pakistan and elsewhere.69 And most notably, in May 2011 US Navy SEALS killed Osama bin Laden in a high-stakes raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan, conducted without the knowledge of the Pakistani government.

Nonetheless, Obama’s foreign policy fell short of being transformational in terms of making US foreign policy more successful. Most of his signature initiatives either stalled or failed. Domestic opposition eventually forced him to reverse his decision to close the detention facility at Guantánamo.70 Israel refused to halt settlement construction, and in late 2010 Obama dropped his demand.71 He similarly abandoned his efforts to establish a cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gas emissions.72 ‘Iranian leaders rebuffed his diplomatic overtures’.73 Less than two months after Obama’s Prague speech, North Korea conducted its second nuclear

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test. Beijing failed to reciprocate his conciliatory gestures, and by late 2010 he had adopted a more assertive posture towards China.\(^7\)

Obama’s efforts to stabilize Afghanistan drew the United States into a deeper commitment than he had anticipated. His February 2009 troop increase failed to turn the tide against the Taleban as he hoped. Despite explicit administration guidance to senior military officials that he did not wish to hear requests for more troops for at least a year, the commanding US general privately warned in August 2009 of ‘mission failure’ if substantially more troops were not sent and the strategy changed.\(^7\) The report quickly leaked, creating an uproar. Obama launched a fresh review of Afghanistan policy that culminated in a decision to dispatch 30,000 more troops, with the aim of beginning to withdraw them by July 2011.\(^7\) As that deadline approached, military conditions had improved but the political situation in Afghanistan remained perilous.\(^7\)

**The limits to change**

Obama’s failure to transform American foreign policy had several roots. One was the sheer number and complexity of the problems he inherited. Topping the list was the financial crisis. Obama spent much of his first six months in office working to prevent the collapse of the US economy and with it the international financial system. The purely foreign policy challenges he faced—Middle East peace, climate change and nuclear proliferation, to name a few—were messy, perhaps intractable, problems that were not amenable to unilateral American solutions or perhaps even multilateral ones. And events were not kind to Obama. Whether it was the green movement in Iran or the Arab Spring, his foreign policy challenges multiplied rather than shrank. And while these crises may have given Obama opportunities, the expensive US commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan and the US government’s dismal fiscal position limited his possible responses.

Domestic politics did Obama no favours, either. Although Democrats initially controlled both House and Senate, the latter’s peculiar rules enabled the Republican minority to delay if not block outright foreign policy initiatives such as cap-and-trade legislation that required congressional consent. Obama won Senate approval of the New START treaty, but only after a bruising political battle that consumed the White House’s attention for several months. The lesson was clear: passing foreign policy legislation would require intense commitments of scarce time and energy.


\(^7\) The particulars of the Afghan strategy review are extensively documented in Woodward, *Obama’s wars*, esp. chs 13–28.

Obama’s own missteps hampered his cause. The numerous special envoys he appointed created confusion about who was in charge of which policy, and his first National Security Advisor, General James Jones, struggled in the position. Obama failed to anticipate that his demand for a halt to Israeli settlement activity would strengthen Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s position at home. Obama’s slow response to the 12 June protest movement in Iran energized his critics and dismayed his supporters. His conciliatory gestures towards China emboldened Beijing rather than tamed it. He neglected relations with emerging democratic powers such as Brazil, India and Indonesia during his first year in office, and his often inept handling of personal relations with foreign leaders alternately annoyed and alarmed even close allies.

But Obama’s foreign policy strategy suffered from a more fundamental problem: it rested on an overly optimistic premise. He had assumed that if the United States moderated its tone, reached out to foreign capitals, stressed common interests and then decided to lead, others would follow. Bush had failed, on this assessment, not so much because issues were complicated, or countries disagreed over what to do and how to do it, or because foreign capitals had different priorities, but because he had led badly. Obama would instead reclaim the diplomatic mantle of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John Kennedy.

Obama, however, had become president in an entirely different geopolitical context from any of these presidential predecessors. No country was playing the role of the Soviet Union, spurring countries to put aside differences to rally around the United States. Rapid economic growth in emerging markets had shifted the balance of global economic power and created new cross-national networks both within and between regions that bypassed the United States. The 2008–2009 financial crisis further weakened the US ability to lead, its economic woes being interpreted both abroad and at home as evidence of its decline.

None of this was a surprise for Obama. He had spoken often on the campaign trail about how globalization was remaking the world. But he had not followed his analysis of global trends to its logical conclusion. A world in which power was more dispersed and new cross-national networks had developed would be a world that was harder to lead. Rather than hungering for US leadership, many countries were indifferent to it. They did not see Washington offering solutions that addressed their primary concerns. So they pursued their interests elsewhere.

At times, even traditional friends and allies as well as rising powers contested

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78 See among others, Alter, *The promise*, p. 75.
American leadership. China sought to reconfigure the balance of power in Asia and remake the global financial architecture on a pattern more to its liking. Brazil and Turkey tried to broker a deal with Iran over its nuclear weapons programme. India saw itself as the dominant power from Aden to the Strait of Malacca, not as a junior partner to Washington. Reconciling these competing ambitions, interests and priorities was a daunting, perhaps Sisyphean, task.

Obama acknowledged the problem early in his presidency. ‘If there’s just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a brandy, that’s an easier negotiation,’ he noted. ‘But that’s not the world we live in’. He calculated that if the United States listened more and stressed common interests ‘at the margins, they [other countries] are more likely to want to cooperate than not cooperate’. This was what one politically tone-deaf Obama adviser called ‘leading from behind’. But the key question left unasked and unanswered was whether more cooperation would translate into enough cooperation. As a result, Obama declined to adjust his foreign policy goals, and struggled to devise a strategy for advancing US interests in a world where other powers, large and small, were busy protecting their own. He stayed on course, laying down markers and drawing lines, only to see many of them ignored.

Succeeding in a globalized world

September 11 redefined US foreign policy. George W. Bush believed that the attacks provided a new orientating principle for US foreign policy and mandated an aggressive US response. In fighting the war on terrorism he sought to remake the global landscape in a form more conducive to American security. But fighting terrorism proved far too narrow a focus for US policy. The United States simply had too many other interests beyond its borders. Bush’s war on terror ultimately showed the limits of American power and saddled his successor with a raft of messy foreign policy problems.

Obama understood that globalization had remade the geopolitical terrain. Power had been dispersed not just across a wider array of countries, but to non-state actors as well. The days when the United States could impose solutions, if they had ever existed, did so no longer. Navigating this more complex world required listening to others and giving ‘them a stake in upholding the international order’.

88 Obama, ‘Renewing American leadership’, p. 11.
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What Obama stumbled over was not the diagnosis but the prescription: even if Washington led wisely and sympathetically, others might not follow. Consultations could not guarantee consensus. Governments could and did disagree over which issues constituted threats or opportunities, what priority they should be given, how they should be handled and who should bear the responsibility for addressing them. The result too often was inaction or gridlock.

Obama’s challenge is one his successors are likely to confront as well: how to promote US interests in a world that often will not automatically respond to US leadership even as the United States remains the single most powerful and influential country. That may require new strategies—or, just as likely, a narrower definition of US goals overseas and hard choices among priorities. That search will be painful. Much of the world expects US leadership even when it bristles at it. Obama’s effort to shift the burden of fighting in Libya onto other NATO countries foundered because they were neither accustomed to leading nor necessarily capable of it.

Obama’s task will be perhaps even more daunting at home. Countries, like people, live in the past, hailing old triumphs and ignoring the march of events. Domestic groups will resist change even as the US government’s fiscal woes create intense political pressures to scale back its commitments overseas. Proposals to rethink old policies will be met with renewed claims that Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism. But unless Obama finds a way to align his foreign policy prescriptions with evolving global trends, the gap between American aspirations and accomplishments will grow, and the prospects for successful US global leadership will dim further.

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