

Is it too soon to start talking about Obama's foreign policy legacy?

Written by The Conversation USA

Aided and abetted by a disciplined Republican party, a common meme in the American media is the foreign policy failure of the Obama administration. The purported evidence is there for all to see. It includes being dragged back into a war in Iraq, an apparent incapacity to thwart Putin's rogue behavior and – most recently - an inability to hang on to another Secretary of Defense.

The underlying cause, we are told, is that there are reputedly too many people in the White House working on foreign policy and none outside of it. And to make matters worse, these people the president trusts (often unspecified but presumed by everyone to be the triumvirate of John Kerry, Samantha Powers and Susan Rice) can't even communicate their message about Obama's Grand Strategy – leading us to conclude he has none.

Now the FBI has issued a [warning](#) that the Islamic State is recruiting homegrown terrorists to strike in the United States. So, unless Obama can pull off a remarkable foreign policy success like the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, redemption is apparently not in sight.

“Done and dusted,” as the British say. Or “case closed” to use the American vernacular. History will adjudge the Obama presidency to be one of foreign policy failure.

Yes, I realize that we still have a couple of years to go. But if others are ready to write an obituary it seems only fair that we also discuss a legacy.

For the record, the judgment of presidents by historians often provides a startling contrast with any contemporary analysis. Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy are now hailed as foreign winners. Yet Truman couldn't get Congressional support for his policies. Kennedy led us into Vietnam and the Bay of Pigs – both disasters in their own ways. Richard Nixon has been redefined as a statesman, although the departure from Vietnam makes the one from Afghanistan look positively orderly. In contrast, many experts have described Bill Clinton's foreign policy as haphazard and ineffectual – and he may today be the most popular politician (the only popular politician?) in the US and, indeed, the world.

So how will we look back on the Obama foreign policy legacy? Several recent events give us a

clue as to what a historian might write in 50 years.

Economic health

First, he or she might dwell on what Obama's engineered economic recovery did to restore America's global economic standing. Certainly, the recovery has been slow and uneven. Millions remain in poverty. Many Americans have learned to deal with life without the safety net common in other western countries. The percentage of all Americans in the workforce is the lowest in decades at a fraction [under 60%](#) .

Yet, the traditional measures of economic vitality all show healthy signs. The official number of unemployed has steadily declined. Indeed, it would have been inconceivable to many when Obama took office that it would be back below 6% six years later. And American growth rates are now the envy of the OECD countries – at 4.6% in the second quarter and 3.9% in the third.

Meanwhile, in contrast, Europe faces the prospect of continued deflation and huge levels of unemployment. Japan remains mired in a depression. Even China's economy is pulling back and faces the prospect of its property bubble bursting.

The overall effect of these countertrends is the restoration of the value of the dollar – and with it global confidence in the staying power of the American economy.

A strong dollar, along with an unparalleled military capacity was the basis for American power and influence in the second half of the twentieth century. Sure, it would be premature today to announce America's return as the world's economic leader. Indeed, hubris has been a consistent theme since the end of the Cold War. But if things continue in this vein (and that is a big "if") then our historian might look back upon Obama quite kindly.

Energy self sufficiency

The second theme – and possibly the most long lasting – is the transformation of the US economy from one held hostage to foreign energy producers to a degree of self-sufficiency not seen since well before the 1970s. Shale gas production, regulatory support for new forms of energy, and new conservation initiatives have together changed the face of American energy dependency.

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The Republicans in 2008 chanted “dig baby dig.” They got what they wanted, albeit from the wrong candidate. We’ve moved so far along this curve that the president feels comfortable opposing the Keystone pipeline without responding to claims that it’ll enhance American energy independence.

Clearly, America’s foreign policies have yet to fully catch up with its shifting energy economics. We still fight wars in the Middle East and patrol the Straits of Hormuz – at least in part - to keep oil flowing to global markets. But the next president might decide that it isn’t worth the cost in blood and treasure, in which case our historian might give Obama credit for laying the foundation for his successors’ choices.

Certainly, a more immediate effect of this energy transformation is evident in two areas this week. The fall in the price of oil from over \$100 a barrel to under \$70 has precipitated a supposed new price war with Saudi Arabia. Many now claim that the Saudis are trying to drum US producers out of business. Whether that is true or not, the underlying theme is that the US isn’t so reliant on Saudi support for its security policies in the Middle East. Stated more bluntly, the Saudis can’t use oil as leverage on what the US does in the region.

That same fall in the price of oil is being used by the US as a cudgel against Putin over his policies in the Ukraine. A 40% decline in the value of the rouble against the dollar this year means that Russia can’t pay its bills. It also led to a Russian announcement this week that their economy will contract next year – contradicting their earlier estimates. Their efforts to sell energy to the willing Chinese will take years to come on line. Meanwhile, the US will test the degree to which the Russian public will support Putin as the worsening effects of a recession takes hold.

In sum, our historian might write that the Obama presidency marked the watershed when America went from being a country where energy dependency could be leveraged against it to one able to wield its independence as a weapon.

Iran negotiations

And finally, our historian may reflect on whether this presidency resolved the “Iranian Question.”

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The jury is still clearly out on that one. The decision last week to further delay a deadline for a final agreement between the six world powers (referred to as P5+1) and Iran generates understandable anxiety for those who live in the region and have a legitimate fear of the Iranian development of nuclear weapons.

It is easy to make reassuring noises when you don't face the prospect of a direct threat. But what our historian may say is that the Obama administration's willingness to patiently negotiate with the Iranians was in stark contrast to his predecessor. It demonstrated unusual restraint for an American president. It will be up to our historian to judge if it was ultimately successful and whether it signaled a lasting change in America's approach to foreign policy.

Clearly, lots can happen in the next two years. But if the pundits are willing to speculate, why can't we?

Simon Reich does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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