

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1mZgRIU>

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Obama's Implicit Foreign Policy

Roger Cohen FEB. 25, 2016

WASHINGTON — *This is the speech President Obama did not make on his foreign policy (with thanks to Stephen Heintz, a shrewd observer of America's role in the world):*

My fellow Americans:

I have based my foreign policy on some tough realities that are hard to talk about because no American likes to hear about the limits of our power. But those limits have grown. American power in the 21st century cannot be what it was in 1945 — or even in 1990.

To say this is to be accused of defeatism, of managing American decline and of giving up on American exceptionalism. That is why I have pursued an implicit foreign policy rather than an explicit one. That is why I waited so long to give this speech on my doctrine of restraint. No president wants to make a speech called “The Consequences of the End of the American Century.” It’s political suicide.

Implicit has meant letting actions speak. Some say I have failed to understand the theater of American leadership. I’ll leave the strutting on the world stage to others.

Our world is more interdependent than ever. China, India and other nations

have grown rapidly, ending an era of Western domination. The Chinese economy has quintupled in size since 1990. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq consumed trillions of dollars but did not bring victory. The enemies we face, often groups of violent extremists, cannot be vanquished through conventional warfare.

The consequence is that American power still counts but no longer clinches the deal. Multilateral solutions to international problems must be pursued. The Iran nuclear agreement — reached with help from Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany — is one example. Another is the Paris Climate Agreement. Military power can only be used as a last resort, for clear and achievable political ends, and when there is a workable plan for post-military development. That was not the case in Iraq. Look at the price.

I know that many people think my policies have failed in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, and that President Putin has filled the vacuum. My priority was to avoid overreach in the use of American power, adjust our ambitions to the realities of the world and devote resources to neglected domestic priorities including infrastructure, inequality and health care.

In 2016, we have no business building other nations. It is for them to decide their fates. As a result, I have asked a lot of questions, so many that I hear that Bob Blackwill, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, calls me “the king of the slippery-slope school of foreign policy.”

I'll take that moniker, if the alternative is to embrace feel-good posturing and drift into another intractable war in which young Americans die for murky causes in the indifferent sands of the Middle East.

Should I have backed the pro-democracy uprising of young Iranians in 2009 against the regime, and might American support have tipped the balance? Should I have done more to ensure the fragile Egyptian experiment in democracy did not fail by pressing former President Mohamed Morsi to restrain his divisive Muslim Brotherhood agenda? Should I have called the coup that ousted him a “coup”?

Should I have armed the rebels in Syria, or established a no-fly zone once President Bashar al-Assad began murdering his citizens en masse, or set up a safe

area to protect desperate refugees as a gage of our determination? Should I have upheld through one-off punitive military strikes against Assad the “red line” I set against the use of chemical weapons and so demonstrated to the Saudis and other Sunni gulf states that I was not, as they believe, in the pocket of the Shia world? In short, should I have kept my word and taken more risks to save Syria, oust Assad and stop Putin dictating the outcome?

Perhaps. I know members of my foreign policy team have agonized over Syria and its quarter-million dead. One or two may have been close to resigning. The refugee flow into Europe destabilizes allies. But I do not lose sleep. This job is about tough choices. Restraint was the wiser option for a chastened America unready to pass the mantle but condemned now to share it.

I have built new bridges — to Iran, to Cuba. We are working with China to advance Afghan-Pakistani dialogue and bring peace in Afghanistan. Tough love for Israel, more conditional friendships with Saudi Arabia and other Arab autocracies and a gradual reduction in the isolation of Iran are, in my view, the only path over time to a new, stable order in a Middle East where our strategic priorities have changed with energy independence.

That’s about it. You see now why I chose the implicit approach. I hope you will understand the wisdom of my restraint. Perhaps you will even become nostalgic for it. The pendulum swings — and American adventurism may well make a comeback with my successor.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter, and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on February 26, 2016, in The International New York Times.