

Mistakes, but signs of improvement: Obama gets a B-plus for first year

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Twelve months ago this week more than a million people, myself included, assembled on the National Mall in Washington to watch the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States.

These days Obama finds himself in an altogether less pleasant place. Rather than cheers and chants he faces a wall of negative noise.

The left paints him as a Democrat in name only, who has sold out to Wall Street and the Pentagon. The right criticises him for being weak and un-American, a serial apologist who golfs on when terrorists attack.

If we turn down the volume of the criticism, however, how should we grade Obama's foreign policy in his first year in office? It depends on the measure you choose to apply. If you assess his record against the expectations generated by his campaign, which is how his partisan critics proceed, then things have not gone according to plan. The planet has not cooled. Ocean levels have not fallen. Cuba has not applied to join NATO. The international system has not proved particularly susceptible to change, regardless of the eloquence of its advocate.

However, you get a different answer if you use a historian's measure, and bear in mind the structural limitations on Obama's power and the disastrous situation he inherited - two bloody wars, a global financial crisis, active nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea and persistent terrorist threats.

If this is your analytical frame, and you ask how any other individual might have done in his position, then Obama's foreign policy looks pretty good. First, some negatives. Obama was overly ambitious in his first year, launching a number of initiatives that have come to nought. He has very little to show, for example, for his efforts at Middle East peacemaking. Henry Kissinger said the President "reminds me of a chess grandmaster who has played his opening in six simultaneous games. But he hasn't completed a single game and I'd like to see him finish one."

Obama's signature note - engagement with America's competitors and adversaries - has been held a little too long. Reaching out to China and Russia has produced mixed results; reaching out to trumped-up tinpot dictators has produced nothing. Indeed, Hugo Chavez, of Venezuela, who only months ago told Obama "I want to be your friend", now refers to the satanic smell of sulphur when Obama is in the room.

Let us be clear: careful, even cautious, diplomacy is much to be preferred over swaggering rhetoric and impulsive wars. But not all international problems are susceptible to rational agreement in the absence of leverage and pressure. We have not yet seen Obama put the weights on his foreign interlocutors in the way that he must.

Finally, the President has struggled to strike the right balance between counter-terrorist imperatives on the one hand and his liberal instincts on the other, as demonstrated by his failure to close the Guantanamo Bay facility within a year. This dilemma is not going away. It is profoundly worrying that, eight years after September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda could get as close to detonating an inbound aircraft as it did on Christmas Day. This is not Obama's fault, but it is now his responsibility.

On the other side of the ledger, a welcome pragmatism was evident in several of Obama's big foreign policy decisions, starting with him appointing his defeated opponent, Hillary Clinton, as his Secretary of State. Clinton is not just smart and hard-working; she is one of the most

significant political figures of our time, who won millions of votes for president. Her appointment brought significant prestige to the State Department.

Obama's Iraq exit strategy (which built on progress in the last years of the Bush administration) looks, so far, to have been prudent and well-executed. His record on trade has been reasonable, certainly compared with the prevailing sentiment among his Democratic colleagues on Capitol Hill. He has demonstrated an early and strong commitment to Asia. Australia is remarkably fortunate that the US has a president who spent his formative years in Indonesia, and a Secretary of State who cares enough to want to visit Papua New Guinea.

The President's preparedness to use force - for example, his expansion of drone strikes against militants in Pakistan - has been one of the less predictable elements of his foreign policy given the strong signals he sent during the campaign about the need to rebalance US policies away from a reliance on force. The decision to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan - the second major deployment to that country since he assumed office - demonstrated real courage. Before his West Point speech, polls indicated that Democrats disagreed by more than two-to-one that the Afghanistan war was worth fighting. This war will be devilishly hard to win, but Obama's brave decision gives the US military a chance to do so.

Finally, Obama has shown a steady temperament under fire, and he has achieved a new tone in US diplomacy. He has helped to shift global perceptions of America.

Here in Australia, the Lowy Institute Poll last year found that 85 per cent of the adult population believes the Australia-US alliance is very or fairly important for Australia's security - a surge of 22 points since 2007. This is the highest level of support recorded for the alliance since polling began five years ago and the first time that a majority of Australians have said that the alliance with the US is "very important".

Does America's improved standing translate automatically into increased influence? No, but you'd prefer to have it than not.

It is much too early to see the fruits of Obama's foreign policy approach. He has yet to be fully tested by a full-blown crisis, and he faces enormous challenges in the two countries in which the US is fighting nasty wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) and a third where it may still have to do so (Iran). The Administration will also find it increasingly difficult to square the circle of human rights and national interests.

Yet Obama has established a promising foreign policy template. At the same time in his presidency, by contrast, the seeds of George Bush's foreign policy failures had already been sown. From the first, his presidency displayed a unilateral cast. Coalition forces won early victories in Afghanistan but Osama bin Laden slipped through their grasp at Tora Bora. The problems that would curse the Afghanistan effort - insufficient forces, funding and focus - were already becoming apparent, as Bush began to turn his attention to the misbegotten Iraq adventure.

Obama has made mistakes in the past year, but nothing to compare with his predecessor's.

Perhaps Obama's biggest concern as he kicks off 2010 is domestic politics, and in particular his recent run of negative opinion polls. He will be cheered, however, by the underwhelming list of potential Republican candidates for his job in three years' time.

When he was asked recently to grade his own performance in the White House, Obama gave himself a "solid B-plus". It seems that this former law professor is a fair marker.

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