

## Obama's Diplomatic Legacy

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The United States Constitution provides that the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government have separate powers that keep each other in check and balance. However recent years have seen substantial expansion of presidential powers. George W. Bush's unilateral action in the name of combating terrorism and Obama's relatively defensive foreign policy that calls for allies and partners to share the burden of security are both consistent of this trend. No matter who occupies the White House, every president works to leave behind a legacy of diplomatic achievement, especially towards the end of term. Obama's recent string of diplomatic initiatives clearly shows his bid to leave his mark on history.

Years into his presidency, Obama still cannot shed the perception that he is a diplomatic novice. In the face of Russian annexation of Crimea and further encroachment on Ukrainian territory, Obama could manage only to work jointly with major European states to impose economic sanctions against Putin, having summarily rejected the possibility of military intervention. Many considered his response too weak. Following the expansion of Islamic State (IS) terrorist forces, Obama's insistence on withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq was blamed for the power vacuum that facilitated IS expansion. Obama's refusal to consider putting any troops on the ground has further called into doubt his ability to deal with foreign affairs.

The American voters taught Obama a lesson in the November 2014 mid-term elections. Having previously lost their majority in the House of Representatives, the Democrats now lost their majority in the Senate, hastening Obama's transition to lame-duck president. However the savvy Obama team did not take the losses lying down and cede the floor to the Republican Congress. In the immediate aftermath of the elections, President Obama has succeeded in changing the conversation and setting a new policy agenda by the exercise of executive powers and the deployment of diplomatic resources.

Obama set out on his second tour of Asia in 2014 still reeling from electoral defeat. At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing, Obama succeeded in working with U.S. allies to strengthen the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a counterweight to China's anxiously promoted initiatives including Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Afterwards he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and signed four important agreements on climate change, information technology cooperation, military exchanges, and extended U.S. visas for Chinese. Obama then headed to Burma to urge for greater democratization, before capping off his Asian tour with a trip to Australia to reaffirm U.S. strategic deployment associated with the Asia-Pacific Rebalance.

In addition, the international situation has also been a boon to Obama. Russia's ability to withstand European and American economic sanctions was undermined by plummeting international oil prices as energy exports make up the bulk of Russian exports. Meanwhile the U.S.-led alliance has put a halt to IS blustering through intensive air strikes.

Back at home, Obama issued an executive order to reform the immigration system before the new Congress was sworn in. Shortly afterwards, Obama announced just before Christmas that after more than a year of secret talks, the United States and Cuba would normalize their relations. Both policies drew scathing criticism from Republicans but the public appeared to side with the president. Normalization of relations with Cuba should bring tangible trade benefits and provide a counterbalance to anti-American forces in Latin America. The move is also in line with the reconciliation diplomacy Obama has advocated since taking office and marks a personal diplomatic coup. The anticipated reopening of a U.S. embassy in Havana is likely to provide the grand stage for a state visit towards the end of his tenure.

It goes without saying that challenges to American diplomacy do not abate in the Korean Peninsula, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, and elsewhere. However, Obama is counting on astute decision making at critical junctures to secure diplomatic gains. Barring a major blunder, he has every reason to expect some level of success.

Where Taiwan is concerned, U.S.-Taiwan relations have not seen significant developments under Obama's watch. Though Washington has

perfunctorily supported Taiwan's participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization, declared its willingness to sell less sensitive weapons to Taiwan, granted Taiwan visa-waiver status, resumed talks with Taiwan under the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, and sent a cabinet-level official to visit Taiwan, there has been little headway in advancing visits by high-level Taiwanese officials to Washington or in assisting Taiwan's participation in important international institutions. Ma Ying-jeou in his wonted complacency considers the bilateral relationship at its best, but much more could and should have been accomplished. Xi Jinping's planned return visit to Washington later this year warrants our close attention as it has the potential to influence U.S.-China relations in ways detrimental to Taiwan. **BT**

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