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## United States' Foreign Policy Under Obama: What Could a Second Term Bring?

In the modern American political tradition, presidential second terms are generally associated with securing the legacy of the incumbent with landmark achievements or breakthroughs on issues which eluded their predecessors. Foreign policy is often considered an especially congenial area in this context, since it offers arguably the best opportunities for presidents to assert their leadership and display far-reaching vision, largely free from domestic political constraints. Without the prospect of another election campaign in sight, presidents feel encouraged to act more boldly on the international front. This is especially true when they face serious internal impediments, such as a divided government, which would prevent them from carrying forward their domestic agenda, or because they simply lack new ideas and get bogged down in the fight to consolidate what they achieved during the first term.<sup>1</sup>

### A Foreign Policy Second Term? Pros and Cons

If Barack Obama is re-elected, he could be expected to follow the line of thinking that considers the realm of foreign policy as the preferred domain of second-term presidents. A glimpse of this approach was visible during Obama's conversation with Dmitri Medvedev during the nuclear security summit in Seoul in March. Obama promised that, after his re-election, America would show "more flexibility" towards Russia when dealing with the thorny issue of missile defence. Senior administration officials later clarified that no breakthroughs should be expected, given that both countries were in election season. Critics of the administration deciphered this as a thinly veiled announcement to "sell out" America's national interests, and were keen to ask whether it was an indication of the general tendency of the United States to show more leniency in international affairs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: D. Dunn, "Quacking Like a Duck? Bush II and the Presidential Power in the Second Term," *International Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 1, January 2006, pp. 95–120.

<sup>2</sup> D. Goodman, "Microphone Catches a Candid Obama," *New York Times*, 26 March 2012.

Ultimately, whether the Obama administration would be willing and able to run a more risk-averse, activist foreign policy, is a far tougher call to make. The outcome will depend on two sets of mutually countervailing factors—external and internal—which will both be in play.

### *External Factors*

The backbone of Obama's approach to foreign policy-making—the personal popularity of the president abroad, something that played an important, if sometimes under-appreciated role in the first term—seems to be intact. Obama was convinced that the credibility that the United States had lost during his predecessor's term in office was a serious constraint on the country's ability to advance its interests. Anti-Americanism and criticism of America's hubris on the world stage became an easy excuse for other powers to dismiss U.S. initiatives and shun greater responsibility. Obama wanted to turn the tables by immediately declaring that America would “extend a hand” to its rivals if they would be ready to “unclench their fists.” Those who refused the offer of dialogue were facing the risk of growing isolation, thus turning Obama's personal popularity into a hard-nosed foreign policy tool.<sup>3</sup> That was the guiding principle of America's strategy towards Iran, the principal author of which, Dennis Ross, explained that “if engagement was not possible, we needed a way to demonstrate to the world, unmistakably, that the problem was not with the United States, but with Iran's behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

Recent polls suggest that the “Obama effect” has not dissipated entirely. While confidence in his foreign policy leadership in 2012 was not as glaring as it had been in 2009, immediately after he assumed office, Obama still scored high on this count according to public opinion in Europe or East Asia. Truth be told, in countries where Obama was greeted with scepticism, as was the case in the Middle East, the situation worsened.<sup>5</sup> What matters most, however, was that in 2009 Obama was largely riding the wave of relief associated with the end of George W. Bush's presidency. In 2012, he was being judged by his own deeds. If Obama were to get another four years in office, the largely positive reception of his work—and tepid attitudes towards his rival in the campaign<sup>6</sup>—could entice him to capitalise on this.

At the same time, however, Obama no longer enjoys the benefit of the doubt; the appeal of the unknown no longer applies to him. He has already drawn bold visions—in Prague, and in Cairo—and has tackled tough issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the escalating war in Afghanistan. His much-hyped, and ultimately failed, decision to close the prison in Guantanamo earned him scornful comments both at home and abroad. Perhaps crucially, since Obama invested so much of his authority in this decision, as well as in the whole notion of doing away with the “global war on terror,” at least on the rhetorical level, this case exposed the limits of his “star power.” Other countries, most notably European allies, were visibly unenthusiastic to accept former Guantanamo

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<sup>3</sup> K. Lord, M. Lynch, *America's Extended Hand: Assessing the Obama Administration's Global Engagement Strategy*, Center for a New American Century, June 2010.

<sup>4</sup> J. Warrick, “Diplomacy and pressure bring mixed results,” *Washington Post*, 25 September 2012.

<sup>5</sup> For data to illustrate this, compare the outcomes of the polls conducted by the Pew Research Center: *Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World*, 23 July 2009; *Global Opinion of Obama Slips, International Policies Faulted*, 13 June 2012, [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org). A similar tendency was registered by other surveys. According to the 2012 *Transatlantic Trends*, approval of Obama's handling of international policies declined in virtually all European countries surveyed, but on average remained quite considerable, well above the 50% threshold, and decisively higher than the approval for George W. Bush's policies, see: *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2009*, p. 7; *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2012*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>6</sup> *Global Poll: Obama Overwhelmingly Preferred to Romney*, BBC World Service, 22 October 2012, [www.worldpublicopinion.org](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org).

inmates. More generally, as some scholars note, a “degree of cynicism and disappointment” about Obama’s performance—the disconnect between his visions and his actual policies—could be a liability.<sup>7</sup> The seemingly surprising eagerness to resort to military force could be the main reason for this. It is thus ironic that, back in 2008, Obama did not campaign as a foreign policy dove—for example, he explicitly declared that the United States should be ready to use force even without the consent of the Pakistani authorities, should the U.S. have sound evidence of the whereabouts of members of al-Qaeda’s top-brass—but he came across as a candidate of the progressive, anti-war faction of the Democratic Party, mainly because of his unwavering opposition to the Iraq War. Once in office, Obama proved himself to be a pragmatist—he escalated the war in Afghanistan (including its covert component), but acted with restraint in Libya. There was nothing ideological in his embrace of the unmanned aerial vehicles to target terrorists. Rather, together with the kinetic operations of the Special Forces, they were seen as cost-effective, silent, low-key tools for pursuing a light-footprint decapitation strategy against terrorist networks.

This approach—reliance on advanced technology to wage operations just short of open war—was also employed against Iran’s nuclear programme via the means of cyber-sabotage. Thus the Obama administration made good use of the tools at hand, and did not seem to mind being accused of following in the footsteps of their predecessors (the order to seek a third option in dealing with Iran, other than allowing Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon or launching a military strike, came from George W. Bush back in 2006), or even acting more forcefully (a five-fold increase of the intensity of the drone strikes against so-called high-value targets after Obama came into office).<sup>8</sup>

However, this “whatever works” attitude, which became emblematic of Obama’s approach to foreign and national security policy, could become untenable in the second term. A set of strategic priorities, a grand strategy—or simply an Obama doctrine—might be necessary to give the foreign leaders and publics both abroad and at home a better understanding of what the U.S. goals are in an era of heightened uncertainty in world affairs.<sup>9</sup> What is unclear is whether, if Obama decided to commit himself to an achievable foreign policy goal and back it unwaveringly with his leadership (rather than delegate it down the chain of political command), he could count on the outside world to listen and play along. Obama may have not only exhausted the receptiveness of international partners to his lofty ideas, but he would also be facing a quite demanding set of partners and external circumstances. Europeans are (and will remain) preoccupied with the uncertainty about the future of European integration. The “reset” with Russia has run aground because of differences of opinion about the Arab Spring and Vladimir Putin’s pointed anti-western gestures. And U.S.-Russia relations are likely to be challenged further because of disagreements over missile defence or American criticism of the deteriorating human rights situation in Russia. Under new leadership, it is most likely that China will continue to view the United States as a declining global power, which nevertheless still stands in the way of greater Chinese influence in East Asia. In the Middle East, key long-standing pillars of America’s regional influence—the alliance with Egypt, the Turkish-Israeli strategic relationship, and the alliance with Saudi Arabia—have been weakened in recent months and years. The Saudis (along with other Arab countries) were dismayed by U.S. reluctance to provide

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<sup>7</sup> M. Indyk, K. Lieberthal, M. O’Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama’s Foreign Policy*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC, 2012, pp. 258–286.

<sup>8</sup> D. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama’s Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, Crown Publishers, New York, 2012, pp. 141–270.

<sup>9</sup> D. Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 4, July 2011, pp. 57–68.

greater aid to the Syrian rebels.<sup>10</sup> On Egypt, Obama made news when he declared that—following a bout of violence and anti-American protests there—the United States does not consider Cairo an ally, thus signaling tensions in the relationship with an emerging Egyptian democracy.<sup>11</sup> This, in turn, further narrows an already difficult path to the re-opening of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

All in all, Obama may find himself better served by not expending his credibility on new international initiatives, but rather investing it where it really counts, and on what might actually turn out to be the key criteria for rating Obama's foreign policy record once he is out of the office: completing a troop drawdown from Afghanistan and avoiding destabilisation in the region, especially in neighbouring Pakistan; preventing Iran from going nuclear (and taming Tehran's influence in the Gulf region); and rebalancing America's overall political and military posture to meet both the requirements of the era of austerity, and the global shifts of power.<sup>12</sup>

### *Internal Factors*

If the current forecasts hold, U.S. Congress will remain divided, the legislative process will be sluggish, thus reinforcing the temptation to redirect the bulk of president's attention and engagement to foreign policy. Even then, however, Obama will be reminded that the infamous system of checks and balances can limit the scope of the possible on the international front, too. The Democrats are likely to remain the majority party in the Senate, but their edge will be miniscule—a far cry from the two-thirds of the vote necessary to secure the lawmakers' consent to any treaties that the administration might want to enter into. The Republican minority will have to be reckoned with when it comes to confirming likely new appointments to the top positions in Obama's cabinet.

The former may turn out especially frustrating in the context of U.S.-Russia relations on missile defence. The "flexibility" that Obama pledged to Medvedev will go only as far as the Senate Republicans allow. It would be incredulous to expect that, after having mounted heavy criticism against the New START in 2010, the GOP would agree on any legally binding limitations on the future development of missile defence—something that Moscow has been insisting upon. The task would be all the more difficult given the fact that the Republican ranks in the Senate are being gradually deserted by politicians in the mould of Richard Lugar, with a distinctly internationalist outlook and a personal record in stewarding U.S.-Russia relations in the area of nuclear arms control and disarmament. Thus it will boil down to whether Russia can be somehow mollified by a (likely) offer to provide greater clarity about U.S. plans as a confidence-building measure—within Congressionally-set boundaries. Beyond missile defence, Obama could either push for further cuts to strategic nuclear weapons (both warheads and delivery vehicles), or attempt to address the issue of tactical arsenals—introducing greater transparency, or significantly reducing their current political role by withdrawing them from the European theatre on both sides, American and Russian (either to the bases in the U.S. or east of the Urals, respectively). The Senate would probably have little to

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<sup>10</sup> R. Worth, "Citing U.S. Fears, Arab Allies Limit Syrian Rebel Aid," *New York Times*, 6 October 2012.

<sup>11</sup> "Obama: Egypt is not U.S. ally, nor an enemy," BBC News, 13 September 2012, [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk).

<sup>12</sup> M. Flournoy, J. Davidson, "Obama's New Global Posture," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 4, July/August 2012, pp. 54–63.

say with respect to the tactical nuclear weapons, and the decision would rather require great care in dealing with European allies.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, an issue on which both the Senate and the House of Representatives could play the leading role—reacting to the deterioration of democracy and human rights standards in Russia—is likely to become a spoiler in the relationship. Republicans are appalled with Obama’s policy towards Russia, and—should he be re-elected—are going to push for “resetting the reset” by whatever means they will have at their disposal.<sup>14</sup> Pragmatic cooperation over issues such as the transit of military supplies and equipment through the Northern Distribution Network to (and from) Afghanistan is already quite deeply entrenched, and should be unscathed by potential high-profile rifts. Yet past experience with the U.S. bases in Central Asia indicates that it can become a trump card in Russia’s hand. More generally, both because of a series of overtly anti-American gestures<sup>15</sup> and domestic opposition, including from within the Democratic Party, bilateral relations at the outset of the next presidential term in the United States are on a downward trajectory, and investing in them on the highest, i.e. presidential, level, may be considered as too costly in political terms. This makes them an unlikely area for Obama’s increased involvement—Russia will not be the priority that it was in his first term.

The final, and arguably most important, factor that can seriously complicate the logic of a second term dominated by foreign policy activism is that, whoever will be president for the next four years, the biggest challenge will be domestic, and will be about addressing America’s short and long-term economic, regulatory, social, and infrastructural liabilities and shortcomings.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, according to the 2012 Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy, the American public is increasingly unenthusiastic about the United States playing an activist role in world affairs, and the two most important foreign policy goals have to do with rebuilding America’s economic strength: protecting the jobs of American workers (a priority for 83% of those asked) and reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil (77%). This is not the same as isolationism. Support for U.S. leadership on issues such as counter-terrorism, preventing genocide, or addressing humanitarian crises is still quite significant. Military interventions would enjoy popular backing if vital U.S. national interests were at stake and the associated costs were low. This corresponded with the desire to maintain America’s military supremacy (supported by 53% of Americans), while limiting defence spending in a responsible manner. Overall, the picture shows a desire for selective engagement in world politics after more than a decade of wars and in the face of an enormous budget deficit.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See: T. Pickering, “Strategic Engagement with Russia 2013–2017,” in: *The Task Ahead*, Atlantic Council of the United States, Washington DC, 2012, pp. 46–47.

<sup>14</sup> D. Kramer, “Obama’s Silence on Russia,” *Washington Post*, 19 September 2012. In practice, the dismantling of the “reset” would proceed along three lines (and would only kick in if Obama lost against Mitt Romney, but it is a good illustration of the Republican attitude towards this policy): acknowledging that Russia is responsible for the deterioration of the relationship; introducing linkages to the bilateral relationship, i.e. making cooperation in one area (e.g. military-to-military) contingent on the state of affairs in other areas (e.g. respect for civil rights); assigning less significance to the relationship with Russia in general (Republicans criticised the intensity of meetings between Obama and Medvedev, and argued that they have had only passing impact on the relationship, especially in the light of Putin’s return to the presidential post).

<sup>15</sup> Beginning with the aftermath of the presidential election in Russia, when the Russian authorities openly accused the U.S. administration of interfering in the electoral process, followed by Russia’s firm opposition to formal internationalisation of the Syrian crisis, or Moscow’s decision to expel the USAID from the Russian territory in September 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Z. Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*, Basic Books, New York, 2012, pp. 46–55.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Foreign Policy in the New Millennium. Results of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy*, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012, [www.thechicagocouncil.org](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org).

Indeed, that the United States is on an unsustainable fiscal path—an issue that is going to strike with full force immediately after the election, and continue to sap the president’s attention for weeks to come—is subject to no serious debate. What is contentious is the way forward, specifically the fate of the decade-old tax breaks that are scheduled to expire at the end of the year, threatening to strangle the hard won, yet still very shaky economic recovery. Republicans in the U.S. Congress would like to keep them intact in their entirety, while Democrats would like to raise taxes for the more affluent. On top of that, both Congress and the administration will have to find a way to avert the so-called sequestration—substantial, automatic spending cuts in all categories of federal spending. Together with the expiration of other temporary fiscal measures, as well as the introduction of tax burdens foreseen by the 2010 federal health care reform, the challenge is being referred to as the “fiscal cliff.”<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the United States’ economy will most probably not be forced over the edge of this cliff—a solution would involve a mix of negotiated tax increases and spending cuts, their degree depending on the relative influence of both political camps following the election—yet it is unlikely to be a long-term solution. A set of factors—the wars, the mounting debt, growing political polarisation and social inequality—has converged to create increasingly heated competition for diminishing resources<sup>19</sup>. On the one hand, this puts additional constraints on the presidential (executive) leadership, and limits its efficacy. On the other hand, given the gravity of this challenge, the ability to address it will be the ultimate test for whoever becomes president, and the ultimate criterion for assessing his presidential legacy—to a far greater extent than any foreign policy achievement.

### **Obama’s National Security Team—Take Two**

Should Obama hold on to the presidency, he is likely to use the period between election day and his “second inauguration” to reshuffle his national security team. Of course, Obama has already introduced changes to top positions in the administration along the way. The departure of Robert Gates from the Defense Department in 2011 was pre-announced and constituted a part of the deal that Obama’s transition team struck with Gates back in 2008, in order to stay at the helm of the Pentagon. More than anything, it was intended to be a powerful signal to the whole U.S. military establishment that the new president, who made clear his intention to shift decisively away from the “wrong war” (Iraq) and towards the “right war” (Afghanistan), would be doing so cautiously. It is essential to remember that Obama was the first American president in the modern era to have neither served in the military nor been subject to draft. At the same time, both Obama and his closest advisors on foreign and national security policy, who were with him from the early days of his presidential campaign—Ben Rhodes, Dennis McDonough, Samantha Power, and Susan Rice—rejected the idea that the Democrats have to “try to appear like Republicans to pass some test on national security,” or in other words simply to avoid being labeled weak or indecisive. This peculiar situation was referred to by experts and advisors close to Obama as the “politics of fear”, which in turn inhibited the Democrats’ ability to think creatively about America’s role in the world. Obama wanted to break with this—hence his bold announcement (quickly decried as naïve by his rivals, including Hillary Clinton) about the readiness to meet with leaders of Iran, North Korea and other “rogue states” (though Obama would have not used this wording—the National Security Strategy from 2010 mentions “enemies,” “adversarial governments” and “competitors for influence”) in his

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<sup>18</sup> T. Henneberg, “Stormy-Annika Mildner, Washingtons Gratwanderung am finanziellen Abgrund,” SWP-Aktuell, no. 56, September 2012, [www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org).

<sup>19</sup> T. Edsall, *The Age of Austerity. How Scarcity Will Remake American Politics*, Anchor Books, New York, 2012.

first year in office, as well as hawkish declarations of readiness to chase terrorists in Pakistani territory.<sup>20</sup> More precisely, Obama and his advisers were breaking with the post-Vietnam label—they did not want their foreign policy to be interpreted through the prism of an old, irrelevant conflict, which in their opinion offered little in terms of guidance for American national security policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Obama's unwillingness to think in terms of the legacy of Vietnam—something that turned out to play a surprisingly important role even in 2004, and sunk John Kerry's presidential bid—was especially visible during the heated debates about the way forward in Afghanistan. When it came to drawing comparisons between Vietnam and Afghanistan, Obama was deeply at odds with Richard Holbrooke, the iconic U.S. diplomat, and a veteran of all Democratic administrations since early 1960s. It also exemplified the differences between Obama's milieu and the old guard of his own party, of which Holbrooke was a symbol, arguably an even more convincing symbol than his political patron, Hillary Clinton.<sup>21</sup>

Still, as president, Obama could not afford to neglect either the help of some moderate Republicans, such as Gates (an endorsement by Colin Powell during the presidential campaign helped, too), or people with actual experience in government work for past Democratic administrations. The former category included his pick for the post of the national security adviser. As the head of the National Security Council, James Jones—a retired U.S. Marine Corps General—was to ensure that Obama would not be seen as too distant from the military, as someone less familiar with its customs and traditions. However, it soon turned out that Jones' assets were not enough to offset his professional shortcomings, most notably the inability to connect with both the president and crucial cabinet officials. Perhaps crucially, with time these assets became irrelevant as Obama himself established good working relationships with the military, and proved with his decisions and actions—on the Afghan surge, on the counterterrorism policy, and later on during the operation in Libya, which was opposed by both civilian and military officials at the Pentagon—that his instincts were distant from the anti-war faction of his own party, and of some of his closest advisors, such as Vice-President Joe Biden.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, Jones was replaced by Tom Donilon, which not only resulted in a more smoothly-running interagency process, but also put a long-time Democratic Party insider in the highest echelons of the administration. Still, when Donilon assumed his post in late 2010, Obama was still not ready to appoint any of his senior campaign advisers or representatives of the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party to top foreign policy jobs in his administration. Donilon worked closely with Biden back during the 2008 campaign, and earlier during the vice-president's tenure as the head of the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee.

The most spectacular and surprising decision about staffing key positions in Obama's national security team was to put Hillary Clinton in charge of the State Department, not least because of the deep foreign policy differences between these erstwhile rivals. Indeed, a big part of the Obama campaign was about denouncing the Clinton camp for running on outdated ideas and policies. Thus, many Obama aides feared that Clinton, as an embodiment of the party establishment

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<sup>20</sup> S. Ackerman, "The Obama Doctrine," *The American Prospect*, 19 March 2008, [www.prospect.org](http://www.prospect.org).

<sup>21</sup> J. Mann, *The Obamians. The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power*, Viking, New York, 2012, pp. 229–240. Mann provides a pretty straightforward quote from Dennis McDonough, deputy national security advisor, on Obama's attitude towards the war in Vietnam: "there's a generational issue. The president's conception of power is not founded on Vietnam. This is the first president [since Vietnam] who's not trying to justify himself in the context of that very tumultuous period," p. 132. For the intra-administration debate about the way forward in Afghanistan, see also B. Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> J. Mann, *op. cit.*, pp. 224–228.

and elite, would hollow out the message of “change” even before the new administration had a chance to take off. The decision to bring Clinton on board had far more to do with domestic politics than with the desire to deploy, as America’s top diplomat, an unquestionable celebrity; after all, Obama fulfilled that role himself. The new president neutralised a potential political opponent in his bid for re-election (should his presidency hit a rough patch) and, more generally, a powerful leader of an intra-party opposition. By the same token, Clinton’s resignation from the State Department, scheduled to take place by the end of Obama’s term—irrespective of whether or not he is re-elected—will mark the most important change to the national security team, all other things being equal, i.e. provided that Obama holds on to his current national security advisor, or does not shake up the intelligence community (which might turn out to be the case in the light of mounting controversy over the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi).<sup>23</sup>

At this point, the identity of Clinton’s replacement is subject mainly to Washington gossip and guessing, and rightly so—any decisions about the staffing of the national security team can be taken only after election day. Still, the two names that are mentioned most frequently in the media and informal conversations are John Kerry, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Kerry became Obama’s most powerful ally on Capitol Hill, which was reflected in his assignation to some crucial overseas tasks. In 2009, Kerry successfully conveyed to Hamid Karzai the administration’s message about the need to hold a second round of the presidential election. In 2011, amidst the changes in the Middle East and North Africa, it was Kerry who travelled to Egypt to converse with the Egyptian leadership about the necessity of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. In addition, Kerry played a crucial role during the 2012 election campaign. He delivered a powerful speech at the Democratic National Convention in defence of the Obama administration’s foreign policy record, and was actively involved in preparations for the Obama-Romney debate on international affairs, acting as the principal “investigator” into the Republican’s views.<sup>24</sup> What could make Kerry a tough pick is his independence as a voice on foreign affairs—something that did not apply to Clinton back in 2008. Kerry spoke out very forcefully in favour of a quick investigation into the Benghazi attacks, thus signaling his autonomy in the Democratic camp. Granted, this need not be a liability, but a signal that if he were to head the State Department, Kerry would be cognisant of the need to adopt a cooperative course towards the Republicans. Perhaps crucially, it would definitely help his chances to secure swift confirmation in the Senate. Somewhat ironically, her reaction the Benghazi affair could turn out to be problematic for Rice’s candidacy. Rice is criticised for having deliberately (and wrongly) downplayed the significance of the attacks, quickly labeling them as spontaneous, unplanned acts of violence, rather than as a premeditated terrorist strike. Rice blamed the inaccuracy of the initial comments and assessments to the failures of the intelligence gathering on the ground.<sup>25</sup> However, if Obama’s decision were to be based on the grounds of loyalty and his assessment of the service both in his administration and on the campaign trail in 2008, Rice would seem to be a natural selection.<sup>26</sup>

In the end, it should be clear that the chief foreign policy maker in the administration will be Obama himself, and crucial decisions are bound to be taken based on his judgment and instincts,

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 3–7.

<sup>24</sup> M. Henneberger, “Trying to Read Romney on Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, 26 September 2012.

<sup>25</sup> J. Rogin, “Rice on Benghazi: Blame the Intelligence Community,” *The Cable*, 5 October 2012, [www.thecable.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.thecable.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>26</sup> J. Mann, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–85.



as was the case on numerous occasions to date, including during the preparations for the raid that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden. Back then, Obama gave an order to act against the advice of some top officials, including Biden, who has built quite a strong position as one of the president's leading confidant on foreign affairs.<sup>27</sup> In this context, it will be especially interesting to observe whether Obama would depart from his dominant attitude when it comes to governing—his perceived aloofness. Indeed, as Indyk, Lieberthal and O'Hanlon have noted, Obama's visible distance from other leaders, his reluctance to build personal relationships on the highest levels of power, was something that limited the effectiveness of his presidency on the international arena, perhaps to a degree comparable with the need to balance his national security team with outsiders (Gates, Jones, Clinton, to some degree, and others).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Obama's personal decision to give his second term a decisively foreign-policy oriented profile might turn out to be a wild card, effectively trumping all adverse circumstances, both at home and abroad.

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<sup>27</sup> J. Traub, "The Biden Doctrine," *Foreign Policy*, 10 October 2012, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

<sup>28</sup> M. Indyk, K. Lieberthal, M. O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p. 273.