

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Anne-Marie Slaughter <[redacted]>
Sent: Sunday, January 8, 2012 6:12 PM
To: H
Cc: Abedin, Huma; Cheryl Mills; Jacob J Sullivan (SullivanJJ@state.gov)
Subject: weekend reading (at the end of the weekend)

B6

The following has been published in different languages in 38 different newspapers around the world through Project Syndicate (I'm now writing for them once a month – they send their columns all over the world). They asked me to write something in December about “Obama at Bay,” weakened by US domestic politics. I took the opportunity to make a very different case.

On another front, I'm coming to town on Jan 26th and hoping very much that your schedule will allow a visit. If that doesn't work, just have Lona name the day for dinner and I'll take the train down!

All best,
AM

While the world may see Barack Obama as a leader weakened by the intractability of American domestic politics, the American public sees him as a strong and capable leader in foreign affairs. 49% of Americans approve of his overall handling of foreign affairs, with 63% approving his approach to terrorism and 52% approving his withdrawal from Iraq. Contrast that with the 30% of Americans who approve his handling of the economy and the scant 26% who are willing to give him a vote of confidence on the federal budget deficit.

With numbers like that, it would hardly be surprising if the White House tries to keep voters firmly focused on foreign affairs for as much of 2012 as possible, with high-profile initiatives like sending Secretary Clinton to Burma, carefully brokered diplomatic deals, and high profile international conferences in the U.S., such as the NATO summit in Chicago in April. (Presidential trips overseas in an election year, particularly with unemployment over 9%, are likely to backfire). They know the iron law of American politics – it's the economy, stupid – as well as anyone else. But highlighting the President's ability to get things done abroad is more than an attempt at distraction; it also sends the message that the impasse at home is not of his making.

So expect plenty of foreign policy news coming out of the White House and the State Department in coming months. Election year tactics aside, however, American voters are right. Obama *has* had a much better run in foreign policy than domestic policy. His achievements are all the more surprising given the weak hand he was dealt at the outset, with an America that had lost its moral authority, its military invincibility, and its credibility as an economic model. The weak economic recovery and the political paralysis of hyper-partisan politics have only added to his burdens in reputational terms.

Yet look at the record. It is easy to focus on what has not been achieved, precisely because Obama himself raised high expectations and then failed to deliver. On his second day in office he went to the State Department to appoint two Special Representatives: George Mitchell for Middle East Peace and Richard Holbrooke for Afghanistan and Pakistan. A month later Dennis Ross was named Special Advisor to the Gulf and Southwest Asia (read Iran). The Administration set its own agenda: a peace settlement between Israel and Palestine, a resolution to the war in Afghanistan, and a new era of engagement with Iran. Three years later, Dennis Ross and George Mitchell have resigned with no agreement in sight in the Middle East; Richard Holbrooke tragically died without having brought the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the Pakistani government to the negotiating table; and relations between the U.S. and Iran are frostier than ever.

It is worth noting, however, that none of Obama's predecessors achieved any of these goals either. And in the positive column, Obama can count the death of Osama bin Laden and the killing of over half of Al Qaeda's top leadership, to the point that the Pentagon predicted in September 2011 that with continuing sustained counter-terrorism operations Al Qaeda could fragment cease to exist as a military organization within two years. Destroying al Qaeda was the original purpose of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. He has improved relations with Russia and negotiated a major arms control treaty.

The Obama administration has also dramatically increased the U.S. presence in Asia, including signing a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and joining the East Asia Summit. It has moved quickly and flexibly in response to the revolutions across the Middle East: changing a thirty-year relationship with the Egyptian government in the space of a week; helping convince the Egyptian military not to fire on their citizens in the first round of the revolution; assembling and enabling a successful coalition to intervene in Libya to protect Libyan civilians, working closely with Turkey, the EU and Saudi Arabia to increase pressure on the Syrian regime in many different ways; working with Egypt to broker a settlement in Yemen; and working behind the scenes to convince the Bahraini government to undertake an investigation of its own violence against Shiite protester.

Moving south, the U.S. dedicated considerable diplomatic and development resources to ensure that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the civil war between north and south Sudan was actually implemented, allowing the peaceful secession of South Sudan and its establishment as an independent state. And although engagement may have failed with Iran and North Korea, the Obama Administration has helped engineer a historic breakthrough with Burma. Finally, the Senate has finally ratified trade agreements with Korea, Panama, and Colombia, clearing the way for a new Trans-Pacific trade partnership.

The common thread in all these achievements is adroit old-fashioned diplomacy. In choosing Hillary Clinton to be Secretary of State, President Obama appointed one of the most respected and admired women in the world. She has lived up to her reputation. Susan Rice has also had a remarkable run at the UN, consistently delivering votes in the Security Council and the Human Rights Council, an organization that the Administration rejoined with a commitment to restoring its credibility. And countless talented career foreign service officers and political appointees have worked intensively behind the scenes.

On a deeper level, the administration is effectively pursuing a coherent grand strategy. President Obama used his inaugural address to call for a "new era of responsibility." On the international side, he announced in his national security strategy that "the burdens of a young century cannot fall on American shoulders alone" and then proclaimed a U.S. strategic commitment to an "international order based on rights and responsibilities," including a "broader voice – and greater responsibilities" for emerging powers and the imposition of real consequences on those nations who violated their international obligations. The strategy is to build and strengthen international order by making more room at the table for 21st century powers but then insisting that they participate actively in enforcing the rules and obligations they are charged with upholding.

Within two years of taking office President Obama presided over the transformation of the G-8 into the G-20, the re-weighting of votes on the IMF Board away from Europe and toward new economic powers, and a commitment to support India as a member of a reformed UN Security Council, as well as Japan. Equally important, his administration has put enormous energy into building and strengthening regional institutions. For the first time ever, the Arab League is playing an active role in addressing the political upheavals and government brutality in its midst, as is the Gulf Cooperation Council. The African Union has been active in helping to restore democracy in Madagascar, forcing the President of the Ivory Coast out of office after losing an election, and sending troops to Somalia. And the East Asian Summit, along with a host of smaller East Asian institutions, is becoming a forum for region-wide security discussions, from the resolution of maritime disputes to fighting pirates. U.S. diplomats are actively engaging members of these institutions, both bilaterally and regionally, alongside EU and other regional diplomats.

To return to American electoral politics, Republican candidates love to hammer home the phrase "leading from behind." But they completely miss the point, imagining leadership as the equivalent of a 19th century cavalry charge where the general is either out front carrying the flag or following along in the rear. Obama is actually far out front in shaping the norms and expectations of a world of 194 states and billions of newly empowered social and economic actors. He leads from wherever he needs to lead to get results. And he's gotten plenty.