

One Year On

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When Barack Obama took office in January 2009, he used his inauguration speech to carefully downplay the sense of hope that he had stoked throughout his election campaign and which his historic election represented. Few Presidents had entered office with so many areas of American foreign relations considered crucially important, or with expectations so high among foreign governments and publics. At the same time the overriding importance of domestic economic issues, and the pressure from his own Democratic supporters to capitalise on his mandate for change to enact comprehensive healthcare reform, meant that the chief challenge in his first year would be to avoid disappointing too many people.

Yet the President has been nothing if not ambitious in the scope of his attempt to remake United States foreign policy. Asked to describe the 'Obama doctrine' in April, the President responded that whilst the US remains powerful, it is only one nation, that other countries have good ideas too, that other countries represent different cultures and histories, and have their own interests. The contrast between the exceptionalism of Madeleine Albright, who considered the United States the 'indispensible nation' that sees 'further into the future', or George W. Bush, who proclaimed that America is a 'nation that serves goals larger than self', was clear: indeed, it is difficult to imagine such a limited definition of American grand strategy passing the lips of any President since the early days of Franklin Roosevelt's administration.

This Special Report, launched on the anniversary of Obama's inauguration, seeks to determine how successfully US foreign policy has been reconfigured around this more limited conception of American strategy. The President's first year in office has certainly impressed some: such was the impact of Obama's rhetoric that mere months after taking office the new President was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 'his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.' The Nobel Committee's recommendation reflected widely-held hope for a new beginning in the United States' relations with the rest of the world.

The authors of the report address the issues that were marked 'urgent' in the President's inbox as he entered office last January. They seek to assess how the new administration has gone about recalibrating its positions and relationships, and to analyse both the difficulties involved in doing so and the forces driving the revision of American strategy. It is, of course, a picture of mixed success, but in every area the ambition of the new administration is striking. In 2010, the world remains transfixed by how far Barack Obama will be able to achieve those ambitions. ■