

➤ Foreword

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The election of Barack Obama was significant in at least three fundamental respects. Most obviously he was an African-American – and every single US President since Washington (himself a slave owner) had been white. Secondly, he was carried into office because of the most profound economic crisis facing the United States since the 1930s. And lastly he came to power when US standing in many parts of the world (though by no means all) had never been lower. Promising hope to the American people and a new style of leadership for the rest of the world, the expectations when he finally took over in January 2009 could not have been higher.

Nearly three years on and twelve months before the next US presidential election – one that his Republican opponents appear determined to hand to him on a plate – it is certainly too soon to make any definite assessments of the Obama first term. But at least we can glimpse the outlines of his foreign policy thinking, even if we still have problems in detecting any kind of grand strategy. Indeed, if anything, Obama, for all his fine rhetoric delivered in that wonderful voice of his, seems to be one of the most pragmatic of US leaders. Thus at first his administration seemed to have few if any strong opinions about the ‘Arab spring’ other than it threatened US ties with key regimes in the Middle East. But as events unfolded he quickly got on the side of the ‘people’ and began to talk the language of the Arab street. Equally, though initially critical of Israel in a bid to win over Arab opinion, within a couple of years he was (like every other President before him) making clear to an important part of the American electorate that Israel remained its indispensable ally in a deeply troubled region. Principles are all very well. But in the real world according to Obama it is facts (and votes) on the ground that count.

That said, Obama has been prepared to think some fairly interesting thoughts about the nature of the international system. Born again cosmopolitan he may not be; and global governance is clearly not his ‘thing’. Nonetheless, he has been keen to ensure that the United States placed itself on the side of historical change. In fact, eschewing the traditional view that American interests lay first and foremost across the Atlantic, Obama and his team have adopted the view that the world is undergoing a serious power shift that over the next decades will make Asia in general, and China in particular, the new centres of influence in a fast changing world order. Other threats may come and go; and other problems will no doubt arise. But it is this alteration in the balance of power that now forms the basis of his long term thinking.

Of course, identifying this change does not mean that the United States is abandoning Europe. Indeed, if the Euro crisis has revealed anything, it is just how important democratic Europe with its 500 million strong market remains for the United States. Rather, it is an attempt to identify major structural changes in the world order, adjust one’s thinking accordingly, and seek to manage all of this in ways that will ensure the US remains very firmly in control of the new global agenda. Indeed, if anything is more likely to enhance America’s position in the world it is precisely the economic revolution unfolding across the Pacific. This not only marginalises Europe at a time when Europe is facing its most profound crisis. It also provides the United States with a new entry point back into Asia as key economic player, indispensable political friend of Asia’s many nervous democracies, and as strategic balancer to China’s rising power.

When Obama asserted in November of 2011 that the United States had always been, and would for ever, remain an 'Asian power' he was not only talking about Asia. He was also serving notice on those who thought the American century had come to an end.

Not everybody writing in this excellent report will necessarily agree with this assessment. In fact, most analysts today – and one or two here – think that the United States is facing challenges so profound that over time it cannot but become a lesser power in the world system. But as these essays also seem to indicate, even if the US is confronting some major problems, on every single foreign policy issue of note – from the Arab spring to nuclear weapons, from alliances to working out the best way forward for a world economy possibly standing on the brink – what the US says and does remains absolutely critical. This is why we still take the United States so seriously; why we cannot avoid thinking about it seriously; and why we all continue to listen with great care to what the current occupant (indeed any occupant) of the White House has to say. Though whether President Obama will be President still in just over a year's time remains to be seen.■
