



Transcript

Achievements and Challenges: Obama's Foreign Policy and the Road Ahead

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Ambassador Louis Susman:

Honourable members and associates of Chatham House, and all gathered here, I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak here where Anglo-American relations have been nourished and celebrated for almost a century. Where the rigorous analysis of global, regional and national issues is a shared passion. Where the freedom to exchange honest and unrestrained ideas isn't just encouraged, it's the house rules.

As an American, I feel right at home.

As I take stock of this storied place, I am also mindful of those who have spoken at Chatham in years past: Mahatma Gandhi. Winston Churchill. Margaret Thatcher. Ronald Reagan. Mikhail Gorbachev. Nelson Mandela.

And now me, a lawyer and former investment banker from the Midwest.

I'm so glad you finally broke with tradition and invited a household name.

In the United States, we are ordinary citizens who aspire to great things. Most of us are not born with title, rank or royalty.

We emerge into life carrying only our personal dreams and desires. But we allow ourselves to believe those dreams amount to a civic right.

And when we venture into the world beyond our shores, we allow ourselves to think we can encourage others to believe the same.

Winston Churchill said as much.

'You can always trust the Americans,' he said. 'In the end, they will do the right thing, after they have eliminated all the other possibilities.'

I'd like to think that – on Tuesday, the fourth of November 2008 – Americans did the right thing when they elected Barack Obama as forty-fourth President of the United States. And though I claim no credit in his extraordinary story, I can own up to being a firsthand witness.

In 2002, I met a promising state senator and a candidate for the United States Senate. His name was Barack Obama.

And two years later, when I was National Finance Chairman for John Kerry's presidential campaign, I happened to introduce him to the Senator.

Sen. Kerry saw his incredible potential and invited him to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. His speech was electrifying – and started him down the path that led to his election as President.

That story was part of a greater American narrative. One that began with Abraham Lincoln. Was pushed forward by Martin Luther King. And which culminated with the inauguration of the first African-American president.

As a friend of mine recently put it, Obama's victory was redemption as well as fulfilment. His election, overnight, gave the world renewed hope for an America they used to admire, respect and look up to.

The America of the Marshall Plan and the Peace Corps. The America forever fixed on positive relationships abroad.

For billions of people around the planet, his election didn't just validate America's devotion to fairness, hope and equality. It proved that hope does not have to be an abstraction. That it can lead to real change – not just in America but everywhere.

Expectations were high. Some might even say too high.

As President Obama learned right away, rhetoric and euphoria lift the spirits but they alone don't solve real problems.

The country's dilemmas were immense and complex, the global ones even more so. As soon as he entered the Oval Office, he found one intimidating in-box waiting for him.

Two wars, a global recession. A financial system on the verge of collapse. A depleted Treasury. A government deeply in debt. International friends and allies exhausted by conflict but eager for America to re-engage with the world. A changing climate. The persistent dangers of old conflicts. New threats from extremism. And the spread of catastrophic weapons.

These were no ordinary times. But then, Barack Obama brings no ordinary perspective to this presidency.

One does not have to be long in his company to realize how thorough he is in approaching issues.

He challenges people to probe the depths of any problem. He pokes relentlessly at long held assumptions. He explores every possible perspective and option. He asks the difficult questions.

His deliberations about Afghanistan were no different.

It was important to him to get the right answers. He was focused on a mission to disrupt, dismantle and destroy al Qaeda. But he never lost sight of the men and women in uniform – and their civilian families – who would be directly affected.

When he decides the path to follow, he communicates his message like few others. He's one of the most gifted orators of our time, joining the company of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and, of course, Winston Churchill.

We saw the president's perspective in action almost immediately, when he prohibited the use of torture. And when he pledged to close the prison at Guantanamo.

As we take stock one year later, we find a world no less troubling. But it's clear President Obama has already taken thoughtful and decisive measures in foreign policy to contend with those problems.

I'd like to talk about the challenges and achievements – the ledger balance, if you will – of this first year.

There are two essential components to his policy approach.

The first: The necessity of partnerships around the world. We can't go it alone. We need everybody.

The second: Diplomacy and dialogue is always our preference. But defense of our national interests is always our priority. If our hand is forced, we will not hesitate to seek stern measures.

The president's first major foreign policy speech, in Prague last April, invoked the importance of partnership and multilateralism.

'None of the world's major challenges can be solved quickly or easily,' he said. 'But all of them demand that we listen to one another and work together; that we focus on our common interests, not on occasional differences; and that we reaffirm our shared values, which are stronger than any force that could drive us apart.'

It is time, he said before the United Nations in September, for 'a new era of American engagement with the world, in word and deed.'

But President Obama also made the second half of that policy very clear in his State of the Union address: America is committed to re-engaging with all nations. But when it comes to defending our nation and forging a more hopeful future for the world, no option is off the table.

Nothing illustrated that resolute duality more plainly than last December when the President accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo – even as he had taken steps to strengthen the American effort in Afghanistan to destroy al Qaeda.

One of the President's great abilities is his willingness to take on difficult issues in all their complexity. In Oslo, he laid out the case for war that is sometimes necessary and morally justified.

'A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies,' he said. 'Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.'

Citing 20th century history, the President said it was not simply treaties and declarations that brought stability to a post World War II world. It was America's willingness to build enduring partnerships and defend our interests when necessary.

'Whatever mistakes we have made,' he said, 'the plain fact is this: the United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea, and enabled democracy to take hold in places like the Balkans.'

In all of these endeavours, no one has been more stalwart an ally than Great Britain.

Of all the partnerships we treasure – and seek – none compares to our relationship with the United Kingdom. We know this by our history. By our mutual values. We know this by the sharing of our intelligence. Our joint military training and operations. Our time-forged coalitions in the field of battle. We know it by the business and investments we do with one another.

And we know it, all too often, by the regular spectacle of grieving families, as our fallen soldiers return in flag draped caskets to the military airfield of Dover, Delaware, or through the hushed streets of Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire.

Such scenes are a sobering reminder that foreign policy is not just about words, or three point-plans. It has real consequences.

Nor does foreign policy come with easy instructions. It is always complex, extensive and far reaching. We certainly learned this in Iraq, where we continue on course to end the war with a carefully planned withdrawal of troops, and continued support for Iraq's peace and prosperity.

There are foreign policy challenges everywhere. In every corner of the globe. And partnerships are crucial. That's why we are so grateful for – the support

and partnership of so many nations and world bodies – such as NATO, the EU, the G-20, and the U.N. Security Council.

But of all the challenges facing us today, there are three areas of interest I'd like to focus on tonight.

Those three areas are ...

Afghanistan and Pakistan – which I consider one inter-related topic.

The Middle East – specifically, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And Iran.

I begin with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Our goals in this region are clear. Our strategy is well-thought out. It has allied support. And we have the resources we need to implement it.

Those goals are to disrupt, destroy and dismantle al Qaeda. To deny them a safe-haven. And to make sure they never return. To build and nurture the capacity of Afghanistan's Security Forces and its government. And to fulfil what President Karzai called for at the recent London Conference: An Afghan-led, Afghan-owned initiative that ensures peace and stability in Afghanistan.

As you know, the United States, under President Obama, is dispatching 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. And as our international partners—announced at the recent London Conference on Afghanistan, they will supply more than 9,000 troops and trainers.

We are so grateful to the United Kingdom, Afghanistan, and the UN for hosting that conference – which has proved such an invaluable forum.

Our strategy is threefold.

One: Security. With the commitments and resources from our allies, we will transition all security responsibility to full Afghan leadership.

Two: Reintegration. We will support Afghan efforts to reintegrate into society those commanders and fighters who are not committed to insurgent ideology and who reject al Qaeda.

Three: Governance and Development. We'll promote good governance, human rights and economic development. We'll encourage the government to continue to fight corruption and support the rights of all Afghans.

In other words, we don't come merely to build military might. We come to build civilian capabilities. We've put in place an innovative whole-of-government approach to do this. In addition to the military surge, we've tripled the number of civilians on the ground since January 2009.

As the President declared in his State of the Union address, the Afghan government – and its people – must understand they will ultimately be responsible for their own country.

The United States and its allies plan to actively help the Afghans reach the goal of 170,000 troops, and raise police levels to 134,000, by October 2011.

In London, President Karzai laid out a realistic scenario for this undertaking. The country, he said, will gradually assume the responsibility of security over 'the next 2 to 3 years.'

International support has been outstanding. In London, world leaders pledged \$140 million for the first year of the national reintegration program.

From the Dutch to Estonians, all of our allies are playing their part. And whether its Russia providing over-flight rights or the consultations we've had with China to identify common objectives, we've had many productive partnerships.

While it wasn't perfect, Afghanistan did have a democratic election last year. A monumental accomplishment.

Today, six million Afghan boys and girls are in school.

A recent BBC poll suggested 70 per cent of respondents believe their country is going in the right direction. That's up 20 per cent from the previous year. And 69 per cent declared they do not want a return to the Taliban.

These are steps in the right direction. But challenges remain before us. We are committed to facing up to them. And our plans to move forward are clear and unequivocal:

Maintaining the unity of our allies over the long term.

Encouraging the Afghans on reconciliation.

Providing the security to allow the country to put together its institutions and to have governance.

And creating a stable and reliable partner that will face up to a culture of corruption.

Of course, the destiny of Afghanistan is tied to its immediate neighbour Pakistan. No policy can work without both countries in the equation.

We must reinforce to the Pakistanis that extremism hurts them too. Urge them to control their borders, and continue to fight al Qaeda and its allies. And to build on their recent successes.

We are committed to an enduring relationship. Towards this goal, we have already committed \$1.5 billion a year for over five years to strengthen development and democracy. To invest in energy, water and health programs. And support reforms that create economic growth and jobs.

We support their governance and democracy in all regions of the country. Ultimately, the steps we are taking together are the best antidote to extremism.

I move, now, to the Mideast ... A second area of concern for all of us.

The challenges of the Israel-Palestine conflict need little introduction to the people in this room – or the world outside. Secretary Clinton sees evidence of this everywhere she travels. It is the first or second issue that people raise with her.

President Obama's commitment to a fair and just resolution in the Mideast is total. An immediate measure of this was his early appointment of George Mitchell as our special envoy. Anyone who can help bring about the peace in Northern Ireland is a negotiator with skills and success.

The President, Secretary Clinton and Special Envoy Mitchell remain committed to the two-state solution in which Israel is secure and the Palestinians have the sovereign state their nation truly deserves.

President Obama set the tone for this administration early with his speech in Cairo. He assured the Arab world that we share common principles. That extremism is the western world's enemy – not Islam. And he reminded everyone that his global background and upbringing bring a unique perspective to the process.

We have also worked with our strategic partners, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, who have been positive and helpful. And we have talked directly with all Israel's neighbors in pursuit of a genuinely regional solution.

Our strategy for peace must continue on three tracks.

First, the political track. That is, direct negotiations between the parties.

Secondly, the security track. We support a sustainable agreement with full security.

Third, the economic development track. We will support measures that improve the economy and provide the basis for the governance of an independent Palestinian state.

Special Envoy Mitchell's primary objective is to encourage all parties to reach agreement on permanent status issues. This is part of our ongoing mission – to work towards helping the Palestinians build the economy and institutions that will be necessary when a Palestinian state is established. In this region all objectives are mutually reinforcing. None can be attained without the other.

President Obama has been the first to admit we have not enjoyed the early breakthrough we were hoping for. Neither side has moved decisively enough to change their political environment, their coalitions, and their internal divisions.

'This is as intractable a problem as you get,' he said. 'I think that we overestimated our ability to persuade them to engage in meaningful conversation when their politics ran contrary to that.'

We must proceed with patience. But proceed we will.

We must reassure Israel that a negotiated path to a two-state solution is in their best interests.

And we recognize every positive step towards peace – such as Israel's agreement to freeze new housing projects and Hamas's continued observation of its ceasefire with Israel.

The Middle East remains a top priority. We are not giving up on this corner of the earth, that means so much to so many. We believe a lasting peace can change the region – and indeed this world – for the better.

The stakes are that crucial. That's why we remain committed to making it work.

Iran is the third country I'd like to discuss – a nation where the dictates of its government remain at odds with the aspirations of its people and the peaceable code of the world.

Secretary of State Clinton is clear about our strategy. We continue to hold an outstretched hand to Iran. But we are willing also to apply pressure because we recognize the seriousness of the nuclear issue. And if Iran is isolated, it is not in the region's long-term interest.

We will continue to speak out on Iran regarding human rights and the Iranian government's relations with its citizens. We believe Iranian citizens have the same right that all citizens should have, to demonstrate peacefully, to participate in the political process. Repression and intimidation cannot be accepted. As Vice President Biden said this week, Iran's leaders are 'sowing the seeds of their own destruction,' with such heavy handed tactics.

From the beginning, this administration – along with its P-Five plus One partners – has pursued a dual-track approach. Diplomatic engagement along with coalition-supported pressure. And over the past year, we have reached out to Iran in a number of ways. But it has chosen a different path, with groundless accusations and counter proposals designed purely for defiance and delay.

This week Iran suggested that it would accept the IAEA's proposal on fuel-reprocessing. This is the deal that Iran walked away from in October. We are unaware of them giving a formal response to the IAEA reversing their position, but we look forward to them doing so – if they are truly prepared to say yes.

Until then, as Secretary Clinton noted in London, 'Iran's approach leaves us with little choice but to work with our partners to apply greater pressure in the hopes that it will cause Iran to reconsider its rejection of diplomatic efforts with respect to its nuclear ambitions.'

We are pursuing the possibility of a United Nations Security Council resolution – as strongly worded as all partners can agree on. Should a resolution go forward but meet with no satisfying Iranian response, our next option would be the possibility of further sanctions.

Whatever statements or actions we ultimately take will focus purely on the government's policy, without negatively affecting the Iranian people.

Again, we cannot, and will not, do this alone. As part of this effort to present a strong as possible resolution, we are making the case to China – the Secretary said in Paris – that a nuclear armed Iran will destabilize the region. An arms race will only spur other countries to consider nuclear weapons programs, which is not in their best interest.

The international community cannot stand idle as Iran continues on this path – the one that leads directly to the production of highly enriched uranium and additional nuclear facilities.

Iran risks sanctions and further isolation by remaining intransigent. It must meet its responsibilities and reclaim its peaceful position in the world community or face the logical consequences of its actions.

Conclusion

Almost 150 years ago, President Lincoln urged a divided nation to listen to the better angels of our nature. At his inaugural address one year ago, President Obama echoed that phrase, asking a divided world to choose our better history.

At places like Chatham, we can do both – listen to the better angels of our nature, and choose a better history – with the kind of reasoned and civil debate, President Obama believes is necessary to bring this world forward.

As we do go forward, it's important to understand that – in our small and incremental achievements – the United States is building something reasoned and visionary. But it takes time to build. Progress may not always be as dramatic as we dream, or as perfect as we'd hope, but it is progress just the same. And this President is determined to work for that progress. As he said last week, 'our destiny is connected to those beyond our borders.'

In the tradition of Chatham House, I will open the room to your questions. But not before I salute Lionel Curtis, and all those British and American delegates at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, whose dream it was to create an institute dedicated to studying international problems with a view to preventing war.

That we are gathered here for just such an occasion 90 years later is testament to the strength of that vision – and the commitment of all who have endeavoured to make Chatham House what it is today.

So, thank you, Chatham House. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak before this prestigious group.

Thank you.