



## **Munk Debate on Obama's Foreign Policy – commentary by Ali Wyne**

Since inheriting global preeminence seven decades ago, the United States has struggled to accept what should be a self-evident proposition: no matter how engaged it may be in the world, its foreign policy will always be but one of a constellation of phenomena that shape the day's events. The occupant of the Oval Office, in turn, is but one of the actors who shape that policy—perhaps the most influential of them, but still just one. Anne-Marie Slaughter is properly skeptical of exaggerating the president's influence: it is simplistic to believe that “one man [can] change the global system and embolden our enemies and make the world a more dangerous place.” It should be noted that while U.S. foreign policy has moved back and forth along the spectrum between “maximalism” and “retrenchment” (Stephen Sestanovich's dichotomy) in the postwar era, every president, including Ronald Reagan, has been accused of emboldening America's competitors and adversaries.

U.S. policymakers and observers should take care to ensure that their inventory of the country's strategic errors does not devolve into a selective exercise in partisan recrimination. Russia's policy along its western periphery offers a useful example. It is unclear what the Bush administration could have done to dissuade Russia from invading Georgia in 2008; nor is it clear what the Obama administration could have done to prevent Russia's incursion into Crimea. Indeed, one of the reasons Russia seems insusceptible to external influence is that it is evidently

prepared to absorb enormous economic and strategic costs in pursuit of a myopic course. The ruble has fallen by some 30% against the dollar this year, and the Russian Central Bank estimates that Russia will suffer capital outflows worth \$128 billion. Russia has also compounded its isolation from the West and given China even more leverage in their already asymmetric relationship. If such severe consequences do not deter Russia from further revanchism, it is hard to imagine that the policies of the United States alone, whether of a Democratic or Republican administration, would do so.

The principal challenges to U.S. national interests will continue to confound lawmakers from both parties equally. Take China: every president since Richard Nixon has struggled to reconcile the imperatives of hedging with opportunities for engagement. Given the scale and rapidity of its development, each subsequent president will face a more daunting variant of the China challenge. Or consider the Middle East and North Africa: who could have imagined that the self-immolation of a young fruit vendor in Tunisia four years ago would catalyze a series of developments that collapsed the region's longstanding order? If there are U.S. policies that could self-evidently change the course of the civil war in Syria or forestall the emergence of groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, they have not been articulated.

While an appreciation of America's limits is appropriate, however, it need not devolve into declinism. Robert Kagan reminds us that, contrary to much contemporary recollection, it has never possessed hegemonic influence. Still, it "has the capacity to continue shaping the international system"—one that remains unrivaled. Notwithstanding the present cavalcade of crises across

Eurasia, moreover, the global security environment is actually more benign than it was a quarter century ago: the prospect of nuclear war is negligible, and the possibility of a conflagration on the scale of World Wars I or II, while higher, is still marginal.

Looking ahead to 2016, then, the United States needs to engage in a series conversation about its role in the world. Bret Stephens says it behooves the next president to “come up with a sensible organizing principle for the country that will...remain the superpower for the rest of our lives.” What, if any, is America’s overarching objective? To remain the most influential actor in world affairs? Revitalize the liberal world order and make it more inclusive? Concretize the “new type” of great-power relations between the United States and China that the leaders of both countries desire? However the United States answers that question, prioritizing the Asia-Pacific will be essential; no matter which metric one considers, after all, that region’s centrality to world order will continue to rise. Fareed Zakaria concludes that “the United States can only play the role that it needs to in the 21<sup>st</sup> century...if it is a Pacific power, if it is undergirding the stability of the Asia-Pacific.”

It is especially imperative for the United States to consider these higher-level questions—concerning its global role and the distribution of its strategic equities—given the weakness of its economic recovery and public weariness about pursuing a proactive foreign policy. While crises abroad are an inevitable and inescapable part of every administration’s portfolio, a U.S. foreign policy that is unable to transcend crisis management will prove unsustainable.

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