

Rudderless Leadership In U.S. Foreign Affairs

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American conservatives, particularly those who advocate a strong foreign policy, suspect that the Barack Obama administration is allowing the nation's foreign affairs and defense strategy to fall behind reality. While the United States is still overwhelmingly powerful compared to even its closest military competitor, it is neither omnipotent nor exempt from folly or the effects of deterioration of forces, aging materiel, or strategic incompetence. Adding to the fatigue of U.S. armed forces—America has been at war continuously since 2001, and its troops are stretched thin all over the world—recent White House foreign policy decisions have made the U.S. appear weak, ineffective, and unprepared to counter regional powers like China and Russia.

Among the most recent of such decisions is President Obama's response to the crisis in Ukraine. In his annexation of Crimea, Russia's President Vladimir Putin skillfully played the unrest in Ukraine into an expansion of Russian territory, as well as securing the anchorage of his nation's Black Sea fleet. In response, the U.S. spoke tough but did little. It imposed sanctions on a few individuals associated with the Putin regime, and the Pentagon sent 600 troops into Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania for military exercises, hoping to signal NATO allies that American commitments to them are firm. Finally, the Navy returned the frigate *USS Taylor*—one ship!—to the Black Sea, and that was to replace the departing *USS Donald Cook*.

In late July of last year, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry attempted to restart the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. An April 29, 2014, deadline was set to establish a broad outline for an agreement, but when that day came and went, talks broke down and have not resumed. American officials put most of the blame on Israel, citing its continuing approval of new settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. That, however, is only half the story. *The Jerusalem Post* reports that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Kerry, "I want peace, but the Palestinians continue to incite, create imaginary crises, and avoid the historical decisions necessary for a real peace." Indeed, the Palestinians made no concessions, indicating that they only wanted to force Israel to release imprisoned militants.

The main reason the talks failed, however, may be the Obama team's inability to be a reliable broker. State Department officials have repeatedly disparaged Netanyahu through leaks and off-the-record background remarks. Obama himself has reneged on his "redline" pledges on Syria's chemical weapons, a critical point for Israelis. In addition, the administration has treated as without force congressionally approved assurances on Israeli settlements that former President Bush gave to Israel in 2004—even going so far as to claim that those assurances simply do not exist! Israeli leaders, at least, cannot rely on insipid and even hostile American support.

In addition, the U.S. under Obama has done nothing to counter China's growing aggression, particularly toward America's own Asian allies. It has done little to hinder Iranian and North Korean efforts to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. Throughout Syria's civil war, the world's lone superpower has been without solutions, certainly unhelpful, and even mostly absent. After liberating Libya from Colonel Khadafy, the administration dithered when terrorists rioted, allowing them to kill four Americans in Benghazi while rapid reaction forces waited in vain for orders to attempt a rescue.

Charles Lipson, a political science professor at the University of Chicago, writes in a May 19, 2014, *Chicago Tribune* editorial, “America’s meltdown abroad”:

We face three much larger issues. First, America’s credibility has been shredded by feckless promises and vacuous threats. That’s what happens when you draw bright red lines in Syria and Ukraine and your enemies goose step over them without paying a heavy price. Second, nobody has any clear idea of America’s global strategy. That worries allies, emboldens enemies and raises the risks of war. Third, it will be hard to reverse this decline because America is overstretched financially, growing slowly and tired of endless, fruitless conflicts.

As he writes later in the article, “In short, [Obama] needs to stop lurching, rudderless, from crisis to crisis, outmaneuvered by [foreign adversaries].” The usually supportive *Washington Post* editorial board agrees, recently opining, “President Obama has led a foreign policy based more on how he thinks the world should operate than on reality.” The record reveals that his “reset” of American foreign policy and military strategy after George Bush’s unilateralism and interventionism needs itself to be reset before American weakness gains further momentum.

Essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Self-Reliance*, “An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man,” a truism in government as it is in a family, business, education, or religion. At this time, led by Barack Obama and his team of progressive politicians, the United States reflects the weakness and inconstancy of its leadership. However, it is not an irreversible condition. Manasseh and his son, Amon, were horrible kings of Judah, but Josiah helped to restore some of the kingdom’s lost luster (see II Kings 21-23).

As difficult as it may be, who knows if America’s next president will slow the nation’s seemingly inevitable slide from its former strength? If so, he will have to take a page from Josiah’s book: He will have to start by turning the people’s hearts back to God. In this culture, it will not be an easy task.