

Challenges Facing the Obama Administration

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The US currently faces a number of substantial challenges that are primarily not of President Obama's making. When President Obama took office he had to confront a set of challenges that were without precedent, certainly since the Second World War and probably even before. Not only was he confronted with two wars that were not particularly successful, but he also had to deal with the collapse of the financial system and with a raging domestic economic crisis. At the same time, the president was also faced with the rise of a whole network of Islamic extremism and terror, as well as with the specific issue of Iran and its role in the Middle East. Concomitantly, he had to deal with the question of peace in the Middle East and to deliver on a promise he had made to the American people: namely to change the United States' approach to foreign policy, focusing more on diplomacy and engagement and less on military conflict.

In the US perspective, all these challenges that we are dealing with today are global challenges. This very same understanding of the world can be found in the president's Nobel Prize acceptance speech. This speech is particularly significant, as it represents a thoughtful attempt by the president to personally address some issues that American political leaders don't often get a chance to discuss in the framework of their public addresses. In his remarks, President Obama thinks through what is the nature of diplomacy and war in the 21st century, identifying the same threats to world security that are the subject of discussion in the INSS annual conference.

For instance, in his speech President Obama addressed the topic of proliferation and discussed how it relates to other emerging threats. He emphasized how today this threat manifests itself in ways that are radically

different from the past. In fact, the current scenario is not that of a conflict between states or even of a standoff between nuclear powers. It is the worst threat to security that one can imagine: a threat stemming from the possibility that a small group of people can gain access to weapons that can do incalculable damage. The Nobel Prize acceptance speech also tackled the issue of modern warfare, stressing how modern wars happen within nations instead of between nations, and emphasizing their character as wars fought among civilians.

At the same time, the president's remarks also highly emphasized the willingness of the United States to remain committed to global security, whether it is through the use of diplomacy or, if necessary, through the use of force. In this sense it is clear that the president is not disposed to retreat and refrain from dealing with the current world challenges. The United States is committed to what it has begun, not because it favors any other country, but because it is in line with US interests, US views of the future, and the US's own security.

However, while war is sometimes necessary, it usually doesn't solve the problems. Therefore, the president has relied on a strategy of gradual evolution or incrementalism. And in the course of the first year of the Obama administration, there has been a definite evolution in the world and in the issues that we have been grappling with. This development has not always occurred in the way we would like or as rapidly as we might have liked, but there have nevertheless been significant developments.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, President Obama emphasized that the United States alone cannot secure peace. He stressed that the belief that peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it, and that it takes responsibility, sacrifice, and risk. He was also quite clear that the US would persevere in this path, including on the issue of Iran and on the issue of peace in the Middle East in general. Yet to confront these challenges successfully and to maintain the support of the American public, which is an extremely important part of the whole equation, the US needs not only a convincing way to convey US foreign policy to the public, but also partners and supporters to assist it in accomplishing its goals. In particular, it needs people who will work with it in this region and elsewhere in the world in support of diplomacy. And it will need support both when

working through the problems by diplomatic means and when diplomacy fails, possibly leading it to rely on force

In the eyes of this administration, time in this region is not on the side of peace, and if the status quo mentality prevails I believe that the final regional outcome will be rather dissatisfying to all parties. Americans firmly believe in and will continue to work for a better future for all in this region.

We do believe it is possible, and we are trying to succeed in addressing an arc of crisis and instability that goes from the Indo-Pakistani border all the way through the Middle East, probably the most complicated diplomatic challenge of all times. If we succeed in these efforts, everyone in this region will benefit from it and Israel will be immeasurably more secure. If we don't succeed, it may be because we made mistakes or because we failed to seize rising opportunities, but our potential failure would also in part be due to the failures and lack of cooperation of others.