

U. S. Foreign Policy

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Can U.S. diplomacy bring lasting solutions in Ukraine, Syria and other hotspots?

In March, just a month after anti-government protesters in Kiev, Ukraine, toppled President Viktor Yanukovich, Russian President Vladimir Putin annexed Ukraine's Crimea region. The move prompted sanctions from the United States and its Western allies, but Putin clearly was unlikely to back down. In Syria, after the government of President Bashar al-Assad allegedly used chemical weapons against civilians, U.S. President Barack Obama in September seemed poised to attack military targets in the war-torn nation. But at the last minute, under pressure from Russia and the United States, Assad agreed to dismantle his chemical arsenal, and the threat of U.S. military action receded. In another apparent diplomatic victory, negotiators convinced Iran to temporarily freeze its nuclear enrichment program in exchange for loosened economic sanctions. The deal strained U.S.-Israeli relations, however, casting a shadow over a new round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. In Egypt, the military ousted the country's first democratically elected president. The move earned only a mild rebuke from the United States and a partial cutoff of U.S. military aid, raising questions about America's commitment to Egypt's fledgling democracy.

U.S. foreign policy has faced daunting challenges in the past year, from Ukraine to the volatile Arab Muslim world. The Obama Doctrine — calling for diplomatic rather than military solutions to international challenges — seemed vindicated when, after tough talk by President Obama and pressure from Russian President Vladimir Putin, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad agreed in September to dispose of his chemical weapons under a U.N. resolution. Diplomacy also carried the day when U.S. and other international negotiators convinced Iran to agree to freeze its nuclear enrichment program in exchange for the easing of crippling economic sanctions. Then, in March 2014, Putin seized on turmoil in Ukraine after the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich and annexed its mostly Russian-speaking Crimea peninsula. The United States and several of its Western allies imposed sanctions on Russia, but Putin stayed firm. Along with America's foreign policy achievements and failures came questions about its loyalty to its allies, its commitment to democracy and its legacy after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.



A Pro-Russian demonstrator holds a placard depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin during a March 23 rally in Ukraine's southern seaside city of Odessa. Now that Russia has annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, which is only a few hours' drive from Odessa, Ukrainian leaders warn that Putin may have designs on other areas of Ukraine, including Odessa. (AFP/Getty Images/Alexey Kravtsov)

Turmoil in Ukraine

The dramatic overthrow of Ukraine's president in February was quickly followed by the even more stunning — and surprising — annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region by Russia in March. The United States and other Western allies condemned the move and promptly imposed sanctions on Russia and members of Putin's inner circle, but Putin showed no signs of backing down. Indeed, some observers feared he was preparing to make additional aggressive moves.

Ukraine had been gripped by political turmoil since last November, when President Yanukovich sparked outrage among pro-Western Ukrainians by refusing to sign a major trade pact with the European Union (EU). Pro-Western Ukrainians, who said Russia had pressured Ukraine into abandoning the deal, took to the streets, triggering an anti-Yanukovich movement. Uneasy about events unfolding in Ukraine, Putin in December offered the Ukrainians a \$15 billion emergency loan and lower gas prices, but the protests continued. Then during the week of Feb. 17 about 80 people were killed in violent clashes between protesters and police. ¹ Yanukovich fled the country, and pro-Western Ukrainian technocrat Arseniy Yatsenyuk was named interim prime minister.

As EU officials rushed to Kiev to try to craft a new trade deal with Yatsenyuk, Putin dispatched troops to Crimea to protect Russian-speaking Crimeans. Western leaders condemned the incursion, but Crimean citizens voted in a controversial referendum on March 18 to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. Two days later Putin signed a treaty to annex the peninsula and asked parliament to ratify it. ² He then sent troops to take over Ukrainian military bases in Crimea.

President Obama and EU officials responded by freezing the overseas assets of top Russian officials. ³ On March 24 they ejected Russia from the Group of 8 industrialized nations and threatened tougher sanctions against vital Russian economic sectors — such as banking and finance, energy, engineering and the arms industry — if Putin escalates his aggression against Ukraine.

Putin's aggressive new nationalism and unrepentant annexation of Crimea challenged President Obama's efforts to make U.S. foreign policy more cooperative and less based on military force. Since the annexation, the Obama administration has focused on preventing a deeper Russian incursion into eastern Ukraine, deploying additional military forces to the area to assuage Russia's jittery neighbors in eastern and central Europe. And during a trip to Europe in late March, Obama asked European allies to support tougher sanctions against Russia and help finance an economic recovery for Ukraine. ⁴

He also said Russia's aggression is a test of Europe's commitment to the NATO alliance. "Going forward, every NATO member state must step up and carry its share of the burden," he said. The United States, which pays a disproportionate share of the cost of maintaining the trans-Atlantic alliance, has been urging the Europeans for years to increase their military spending. ⁵

Syria's Chemical Weapons

The United States appeared headed for military involvement in Syria's nearly three-year-old civil war after concluding that government forces had conducted a deadly sarin gas attack near Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. The attack killed up to 1,400 people — mostly civilians, including many women and children — and represented the crossing of a “red line” that Obama earlier had said would lead him to “change [his] calculus” about a U.S. military role in the conflict. ⁶

But Congress showed little inclination to go along when Obama requested approval for “military action against Syrian regime targets.” ⁷ Then the United States and Russia on Sept. 14 jointly announced a plan for Syria to dismantle its chemical arsenal. Within days the U.N. Security Council approved a resolution to rid Syria of its chemical stockpile by mid-2014. Assad accepted the plan, forestalling possible U.S. airstrikes against Syrian military targets.

Some critics fear the plan will strengthen Assad. “Did we just legitimize a regime we’ve spent the past two-and-a-half years delegitimizing?” asked Mohammed Alaa Ghanem, a Washington-based Syrian opposition activist. “The international community’s moral ambiguity [about] the past seems to have been replaced by a dangerous clarity — it’s only the chemical weapons now. This new framing is a problem, a huge problem, for us.” ⁸

But American U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power defended the agreement, saying Assad “has lost his legitimacy and his right and entitlement to govern. . . . [I]t’s misleading to suggest, wrong to suggest, as some have, that somehow taking his chemical weapons away is a good thing for Assad. This was a weapon he was using for tactical military advantage as well as to slaughter people.” ⁹

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based organization opposed to the Assad government, said on Dec. 31 that the death toll in Syria’s civil war had reached at least 130,433. ¹⁰ However, the U.N. has stopped estimating casualty figures in Syria because it can no longer verify the information. ¹¹ Two U.N.-sponsored peace conferences were held in January and February in Switzerland, with the United States and Russia in attendanc. But the sessions ended without a peace accord.

Iran's Nuclear Deal

On Nov. 23, international negotiators announced that Iran had agreed to a plan to freeze for six months its controversial nuclear development program. In return, the so-called P5+1 (Germany plus the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, who negotiated the deal) would suspend some of the sanctions that have crippled Iran’s economy. Other sanctions, including those on oil, banking and finance, would continue. ¹² The temporary agreement would buy time for Iran and the P5+1 countries to pursue a more comprehensive accord ensuring Iran’s nuclear

program would be used only for peaceful purposes in exchange for lifting the remaining sanctions.

Shortly after the announcement, the agreement's implementation was put on hold when Iran objected to the United States freezing the assets of 19 companies and individuals accused of violating existing U.S. sanctions.¹³ But an agreement to implement the temporary accord was signed on Jan. 12 and went into effect on Jan. 20. In return, Iran will begin to receive \$7 billion in sanctions relief, phased in over the six months of the agreement.¹⁴

However, many in Congress were skeptical of the temporary deal. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., said it was “dangerous” because Iran can't be trusted.¹⁵ Over Obama's objections, a bipartisan group of senators on Dec. 19 introduced legislation that would impose new economic sanctions on Iran if the negotiations fail to reach a comprehensive agreement.¹⁶ But the measure has not gone anywhere, and Obama said he would veto any legislation enacting new sanctions during the negotiations. “Unprecedented sanctions and tough diplomacy helped to bring Iran to the negotiating table,” he said. “Imposing additional sanctions now will only risk derailing our efforts.” However, he vowed “to vigorously enforce the broader sanctions regime” and to “move to increase our sanctions” should Iran fail to meet its commitments.¹⁷

A Reuters/Ipsos poll showed Americans support the agreement by 2-1, and most prefer a nonmilitary response if the accord proves unsuccessful; only 20 percent think the United States should use military force against Iran if the deal fails.¹⁸

The administration praises the Iran nuclear deal as an achievement of patient diplomacy that will lead to at least a temporary halt to a feared Iranian nuclear weaponization program and pave the way for a permanent settlement. It also could open the door to broader discussions with Iran over other contentious issues, such as Iran's support for terrorism.

But critics say strict sanctions have weakened Iran and that it would be better to keep applying the pressure in order to reach an ironclad arrangement. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu labeled the plan “a historic mistake” because it leaves Iran “taking only cosmetic steps which it could reverse easily . . . [while] sanctions that took years to put in place are going to be eased.”¹⁹

Mideast Peace?

Some observers believe Netanyahu's opposition to the Iran deal could chill the Israel-Palestinian negotiations, which reconvened on July 29, 2013, after a nearly three-year hiatus. Aaron David Miller, a former Middle East negotiator and currently vice president for new initiatives at the Woodrow Wilson Center, a Washington think tank, said, “If, in the wake of this [Iran nuclear]

agreement you have an angry, aggrieved Israeli prime minister, then that is going to only increase those odds” against reaching a Palestine accord. ²⁰

But Natan B. Sachs, a fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, says, “Israel still relies heavily on U.S. support and needs a tough U.S. stance in the ongoing talks with Iran over the permanent nuclear deal. In this respect, we should expect continued coordination between [the United States and Israel], which may help somewhat with the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.”

The talks began with the goal of resolving differences that have fed violence in the region for decades and building a framework agreement, by May, on creation of a Palestinian state in the region. In December, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said he would be willing to extend talks beyond the May deadline if an agreement for a final settlement — which would include definition of borders and security coordination — could be reached. ²¹

Egyptian Unrest

On July 3, 2013, the Egyptian military deposed the country’s first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, an Islamic fundamentalist, and set about dismantling his Freedom and Justice Party, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. ²² Morsi’s government, which had been in power for a year, had triggered angry street protests for its poor management of the economy and failure to build an inclusive government. ²³

However, the military’s violent ouster of a democratically elected president, even an unpopular one, posed a dilemma for the Obama administration. Amnesty International estimated that nearly 1,100 people were killed during a military crackdown on the Brotherhood and at least 1,000 detained by police. ²⁴ Then on March 24, an Egyptian judge sentenced more than 500 Morsi supporters to death in connection with violent riots in the southern city of Minya last August, which resulted in the death of a police officer. The next day, after a single session — at which no defense lawyers were present — in a trial of 683 other suspected Islamists on charges of murder and attempted murder, the same judge said he will rule next month on their guilt or innocence.

Human rights activists and foreign governments, including the United States, denounced the mass trials and death sentences, the largest in Egypt’s modern history, over the lack of due process. Some observers say the trials indicate the military’s crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood is intensifying ahead of presidential elections. Army chief, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, announced on March 26 that he would run for president, but the date for the election has not been set. About 16,000 people have been arrested since the military’s ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in July. ²⁵



A supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and ousted President Mohamed Morsi burns a U.S. flag during a march against the Egyptian military in Cairo, Egypt, on Jan. 22. Morsi supporters argue the United States should have more strongly condemned the violent military removal of the democratically elected president. The Obama administration froze some U.S. aid to Egypt. (AFP/Getty Images/Ahmed Gamel)

The trials and possible election of a military leader as president pose foreign policy dilemmas for the Obama administration, which has been trying to maintain its traditionally close ties with Egypt without supporting the country's apparent return to a military regime from a civilian-run democracy. Egypt had been receiving about \$1.5 billion a year in military and economic aid from the United States, but the military's overthrow of Morsi made the administration uncomfortable.²⁶ Last October the Obama administration froze \$260 million in cash assistance, as well as delivery of aircraft, tank equipment and Harpoon anti-ship missiles.²⁷ Emphasizing their desire to maintain good relations with Egypt, however, U.S. officials said the cuts were meant to send a message of concern about

developments in Egypt but were "not meant to be permanent," noting that aid programs in health care, education, training, business development and counterterrorism were unaffected.²⁸

Tamara Cofman Wittes, director of Brookings' Saban Center, questioned the message's effectiveness. "This is not a signal to the generals to get their act together," she told *The New York Times* at the time. "At the end of day, it is a pretty symbolic price."²⁹ In Egypt, Secretary Kerry acknowledged that the country was facing "a moment of challenge" and called the aid suspension "a very small issue between us."³⁰

However, think tank scholars Michael Wahid Hanna, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation, a New York think tank, and Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Center for American Progress think tank, wrote that the "cautious and often unclear" U.S. policy toward Egypt "is not sustainable in the long term" and has "contributed to growing pessimism about the role of the United States in Egypt and the broader region."³¹

War Legacy

As Obama tries to avoid American military involvement in new conflicts, he must also deal with the legacy of the wars that the United States conducted during his administration. Since U.S. forces left Iraq at the end of 2011, the country has been plagued by rising terrorism and sectarian violence. According to U.N. estimates, at least 7,818 police and civilians were killed and 17,981 injured in armed violence in 2013, making it Iraq's deadliest year since 2008.³²

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, speaking at the U.S. Institute of Peace on Oct. 31, acknowledged that terrorism in Iraq was “huge and increasing — and we should face it,” but said by targeting all Iraqis al Qaeda has inadvertently united the country. “There is no problem between Sunnis and Shiites. . . . The Constitution rules in Iraq,” Maliki said. ³³

Douglas A. Ollivant, a senior national security fellow at the New America Foundation, disagrees. “The most serious risks to Iraq’s internal instability come from the overlapping and interacting effects of renewed ethnic or sectarian conflict, on the one hand,” he wrote, “and an irreversible breakdown of the current constitutional order on the other. Either of these conflicts could arise along any of the major fault lines in Iraq: Shia-Sunni, Arab-Kurd, or intra-Shia.” ³⁴

In a meeting with Obama, Maliki requested weapons to counter the terrorist threat. In a joint statement the two leaders agreed there was a “need for additional equipment for Iraqi forces” but announced no commitments. ³⁵ However, after an al-Qaeda-backed insurgency in Iraq registered tactical gains in December — notably, in the key city of Fallujah, once controlled by U.S. forces — the United States agreed to share intelligence and accelerate delivery of weapons and surveillance equipment to help Iraq deal with the violence. Kerry said the United States would “do everything that is possible” to help Iraq fight the insurgents, although the administration was not contemplating sending U.S. troops back to the country. ³⁶ The United States has sold 75 Hellfire air-to-ground missiles to Iraq and agreed to deliver F-16 fighter jets by next fall. In addition, the United States promised dozens of reconnaissance drones before the end of 2014. ³⁷

But, according to Kenneth Pollack, a political-military expert at the Brookings Institution, “Extra weapons and drones are not going to solve this problem. In fact, they will make it worse, because it will encourage Maliki to believe there is a military solution to this problem, and that is what perpetuates civil wars.” ³⁸

In Afghanistan, the Obama administration and Afghan President Hamid Karzai appeared to agree on a plan to keep a small contingent of U.S. military forces in that country for 10 years after 2014 to train and advise Afghan forces and conduct a “targeted, smaller counterterrorism mission.” ³⁹ However, Karzai later announced he would wait until after Afghanistan’s April 2014 elections to sign the agreement and demanded an unconditional end to searches of Afghan homes by NATO soldiers. ⁴⁰ White House National Security Adviser Susan Rice told Karzai the negotiations were over and, “without a prompt signature, the U.S. would have no choice but to initiate planning for a post-2014 future” without American or NATO forces in Afghanistan, according to a White House summary of the meeting. ⁴¹ As Karzai continued to ignore U.S. demands to sign the agreement, Obama on Feb. 25 ordered the Defense Department to be prepared to “accomplish an orderly withdrawal by the end of the year” if the United States is unable to reach a security agreement with Afghanistan. ⁴²

On March 15, in his last speech to Parliament, Karzai said U.S. forces wouldn't be needed after 2014 because the Afghan military was strong enough to defend the country without foreign assistance. ⁴³ But Michelle Flournoy, a former undersecretary of Defense in the Obama administration, said, "If we withdraw, and the international community withdraws its aid, you will see the potential for the Afghan government to collapse . . . recreating a safe haven for terrorist elements that still harbor an anti-U.S. agenda." ⁴⁴ A quick pullout of U.S. forces from Afghanistan would likely be popular with the American public: An AP-GfK poll released on Dec. 18 showed 57 percent of Americans think going to war in 2001 was the "wrong thing to do," and 53 percent want U.S. combat forces out of Afghanistan before the scheduled deadline. ⁴⁵

But Michael O'Hanlon, director of research at Brookings, asked, "Why do we want to throw away the sacrifice and the great investment we have made through the years with \$600 billion in expenditures, more than 2,000 lives lost, and take a gamble that Afghanistan will not be a source of problems for us again? . . . If we fail in the war that President Obama took ownership of and campaigned on as the right war to win, I think it will hurt his legacy." ⁴⁶

Chronology

2010

December The first of a series of so-called Arab Spring protests breaks out in Tunisia, where street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi commits suicide after being humiliated by a police woman. Bouazizi's act triggers nationwide street protests that eventually drive long-time Tunisian President Zine el-Abadine Ben Ali from power and spread to other North African and Middle Eastern countries. Rulers in Egypt and Yemen are forced from office, and dictator Moammar Gadhafi is killed by rebels during a civil war in Libya.

2011

March Protests break out in Damascus and other Syrian cities against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, the beginning of a still ongoing civil war.

May Osama Bin Laden is killed in Pakistan by U.S. Navy Seals in a CIA-directed operation. The death puts al Qaeda leadership in disarray and weakens its core. . . . President Obama announces U.S. economic sanctions on al-Assad and other top Syrian officials.

August U.N. Security Council condemns "widespread violations of human rights and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities" but council members Russia and China veto the use of new sanctions or other punitive measures. . . . Obama says "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

2012

September Terrorists attack U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, killing ambassador and three other Americans. Al Qaeda sympathizer group Ansar al-Sharia suspected.

December Obama warns al-Assad the U.S. would take unspecified action if chemical weapons are used against Syrian rebels. . . . North Korea orbits a satellite; analysts

say the launch is a test of intercontinental ballistic missile technology.

2013	
January	In response to yet another round of U.N. sanctions, North Korea threatens retaliation against the United States and its allies.
February	U.N. estimates 70,000 have died in Syrian civil war; a million have fled the country.
March	U.N. announces a fourth round of sanctions against North Korea, which threatens to attack the United States and South Korea. U.S. bolsters anti-missile defenses on the West Coast and in the Pacific.... Obama's National Security Adviser Tom Donilon declares that "the United States will not accept North Korea as a nuclear state."... U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper tells Congress the global jihadist movement has become "increasingly decentralized," but says al Qaeda-inspired groups are expected to continue to engage in "violent and unpredictable" action.
April	The latest negotiations between Iran and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council China, France, Great Britain, Russia and the United States plus Germany end in Istanbul with no concrete results reported.... North Korea says denuclearization cannot be a prerequisite for talks with the United States.... Britain and France tell the U.N. they have credible evidence that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons against rebels. U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper says the allegations are still being evaluated.
May	U.S. officials reveal that North Korea has removed two Musudan missiles, capable of hitting targets up to 2,500 miles away, from a launch site in the eastern part of the country, indicating a de-escalation in tensions on the Korean Peninsula.... President Obama redefines his counterterrorism strategy and pledges to restrict the use of armed drones and close the U.S. military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.... European Union arms embargo on Syria expires, allowing members to furnish weapons to the rebels.
July	Egyptian military overthrows President Mohammed Morsi; Amnesty International later estimates nearly 1,100 Morsi supporters were killed in crackdown on protests and another 1,000 detained by police. . . . Israel and Palestinians renew peace negotiations after nearly three years.
August	Syrian government accused of poison gas attack on civilians. President Obama asks Congress to approve limited military strikes on key Syrian military targets.
September	Syrian President Bashar al-Assad accepts U.S.-Russian sponsored plan to destroy Syria's chemical arsenal. Obama asks Congress to postpone his request for approval to attack Syria.
October	Syria begins destroying its chemical weapons. . . . U.S. suspends some military aid to Egypt over delays in progress toward an inclusive government. . . . U.S. and Afghanistan announce agreement for some American forces to remain after 2014 pullout.
November	Iran agrees to international plan for it to limit nuclear enrichment program in exchange for the relaxing of some sanctions. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu opposes the deal. . . . White House rejects Afghan President Hamid Karzai's

	demand for renegotiation of U.S. troop withdrawal terms. . . . Egypt's interim government brings Morsi to trial as accessory for allegedly inciting the murder of protesters; courtroom disruptions force trial postponement. . . . Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki requests U.S. arms for fight against terrorists.
December	Anti-regime human rights monitor reports death toll in Syrian conflict exceeds 130,000. . . . United States accelerates delivery of counterterrorism aid to Iraq, but won't send troops, as violence increases.
2014	
January	Secretary of State John Kerry gives an unspecified deadline for producing the framework of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. . . . U.N. says 7,818 civilians died in Iraqi violence during 2013. . . . U.N.-sponsored Syrian peace conference begins in Geneva. . . . Iran and P-5+1 sign temporary accord to cap Iran's nuclear program in return for modest easing of economic sanctions.
February	Ukraine's months-long protest movement turns especially violent in Kiev during the week of Feb. 17; about 80 people are killed in clashes with police. Yanukovich flees the city on Feb. 22.
March	Russia dispatches troops to Ukraine's Russian-speaking autonomous region of Crimea, reportedly to protect ethnic Russians. The move spurs international condemnation and outrage. The Crimeans vote on March 16 to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. Two days later Russia moves to annex the peninsula, and the United States and EU freeze overseas assets of top Russian officials.
May	The Ukrainian parliament is scheduled to hold new presidential elections on May 25.

Footnotes

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