

LET'S REVISIT: WHAT'S AT STAKE...

We began this chapter by asking what is at stake when U.S. leaders decide to carry out unmanned drone strikes against the country's enemies, or when they rely on Special Forces action, such as the one that brought down Osama bin Laden, rather than conventional warfare. Some take the view that, as commander-in-chief, the president has not just the opportunity but also the duty to order such actions to keep Americans safe. The stealth activity kills key terrorist operatives, erodes the morale of others, and degrades the ability of the terrorist organizations to plan and train for future attacks. Critics point out, though, that drone strikes often kill and injure civilians, which contributes to anti-American sentiment abroad, and covert action can cause larger foreign policy headaches than it solves. While far less expensive than positioning a large modern military half way across the globe to fight a land war in a foreign country (or two), these activities are far from cheap. Furthermore, the policy process that creates these decisions is highly controlled inside the White House with very little congressional, public, or media scrutiny.

The stakes involved here are some of the highest imaginable. For the nation as a whole, our safety is a major stake. If a stealth war makes us safer, then it may be worth a reduction in the world's good opinion or even the compromise of some moral principles—compromise that almost any form of warfare probably involves.

If the strikes make us safer, then perhaps they are worth it. But what if the actions spur on a new generation of terrorists? Then are we better off? And what of our democratic principles, when presidents exercise such supreme authority? The stakes here are very high, indeed.

So what have been the broad results of Obama's foreign policy approach after six years in office? The verdict is still quite mixed. One measure of its effects can be seen in opinion polls of people around the world. Recent polling has suggested that the view of Obama and the United States has been more positive in many countries, particularly in the European Union and Japan, but the perception in the Arab and Muslim world remains very negative, especially in Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Pakistan—due in part to the drone strikes.⁸⁷ People around the world also have very negative views of U.S. drone strikes and electronic surveillance activities.⁸⁸ Some notable achievements have been made, in addition to the killing of bin Laden. A few examples help highlight how complicated these issues are. The United States and

Russia entered into a sweeping new nuclear weapons reduction treaty, and in September 2010 a new round of peace talks began between Israel and the Palestinians. The Obama administration has begun an extensive round of negotiations with China across a range of areas, including economic issues. The removal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq is complete and the drawdown in Afghanistan has begun. The renewed effort of engaged diplomacy has led to some success in moving Russia to be more helpful at confronting Iran over its nuclear program. At the same time, though, the Middle East peace process has not made progress, relations with both Iran and China are still quite tense, relations with Pakistan are quite grave. Similarly, the now-nuclear-armed North Korea, led by the third-generation Kim (Kim Jung-Un), remains a big problem, and relations with Russia appear heading in a very negative direction. Does that add up to success, or failure?

It is important to remember the complexity of this scorecard. Obama's hopes to restart the Middle East peace process, as just one example, have been dashed largely because neither the current government in Israel nor the Palestinian leadership seem ready to make a deal. If anything, Afghanistan appears to be a bigger mess than we thought it was two years ago, with a debate raging over whether we ought to be negotiating with part of the Taliban—our former enemy—in Afghanistan as a way to isolate the remnants of al Qaeda there and to hasten U.S. withdrawal from the country. Iraq also may be slipping into “failed state” territory. As frustrating as it may be, there is perhaps very little that the United States alone can do about any of these situations.

This underscores a final point. The United States is the sole remaining superpower, but its ability to direct global affairs is severely limited. The limits of American power probably stand out more than do its strengths. That is perhaps one reason why American presidents are drawn to actions like the drone strikes: at least those are something they can control. At the end of the day, though, the United States still sets the tone for the global system, and the Obama approach has largely been one of trying to reengage with leaders and people around the globe. How to do that in the context of the war on terrorism is probably easier said than done. As citizens, though, it is our responsibility to look after Franklin's challenge, to make every effort to “keep the republic,” even if—especially if—foreign policy poses difficult challenges.