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Barack Obama did great on Cuba and Iran, but his policies on Pakistan left a lot to be desired

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When Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States in 2008, I remember one of the people who had worked on his campaign telling me, "We have built [Obama] up to walk on water. If he delivers anything less, he'll be looking for a job in four years." That observation may not be too far from the truth, albeit eight years down the road rather than four. As the president readies to remit his office to his successor, evaluations of his legacy have been harsher than necessary. It is not that the Obama presidency failed to deliver, but that it failed to live up to (unreal) expectations. Although it is not clear how much of his work will survive the next president, Obama has had a few important successes nonetheless.

One of Obama's successes is starting on the path to normalisation with Cuba. The tiff between the world's largest military-economic complex and a country whose GDP is less than the worth of America's richest citizen had long lost any strategic significance and turned comical but Washington stayed course to save face against Fidel Castro. In December 2014, Obama put an end to the absurdity and four months later, removed Cuba from the Department of State's State Sponsors of Terrorism list. This was followed by a resumption of diplomatic missions, an exchange of prisoners, air and mail links, economic initiatives, and ease of travel restrictions. In March 2016, Obama visited the Caribbean island on a three-day trip, the first by a US president since 1928. Of course, some issues remain outstanding, such as the US presence in Guantanamo Bay, but the days of icy hostility already seem to be a distant memory.

On Iran, the Obama administration has, in conjunction with its European partners and China, delivered a commendable outcome. Not only has Tehran accepted safeguards and stringent conditions regulating its research on centrifuges, machining and casting fissile material, and metallurgy over the next 15 years, it has also agreed not to conduct any research in reprocessing spent fuel; verification of each stage has been negotiated. Short of a complete abnegation of its nuclear programme, the United States and its partners have extracted the most that can be reasonably expected from Iran. The Obama administration's perseverance and willingness to take a risk in reaching out to Iran must be applauded: such willingness was not present in any of the previous administrations since Jimmy Carter despite several overtures from Tehran.

Obama has been faulted for his policy on Syria, particularly his refusal to bomb Bashar al-Assad after the Syrian Army used chemical weapons on Ghouta, a Damascus suburb, in August 2013. There is some merit to this criticism — credibility is important in international relations, especially in a state that offers a nuclear umbrella to over a dozen other states — but would a clinical missile strike have truly contributed in any meaningful way to the conflict in Syria itself? The administration did not think so, and there is little evidence that it was wrong.

Obama has also been blamed for not supporting the Syrian rebels earlier on. To assume that this would have changed the course of the civil war is to also believe that Iran and Russia would remain passive while their ally was forcefully replaced by a potentially pro-Western regime. Tehran and Moscow did involve themselves in the conflict eventually, but after it was clear that military assistance, however paltry, was flowing to the rebels and putting Assad on the back foot. More importantly, what was the quality of America's potential allies? As far as the Yezidi, Kurds, or other minorities are concerned, let alone those who are not puritanically Muslim, the rebels were scarcely better than Islamic State. The United States has a history of trying to pick a side that is good enough rather than wait for an illusory perfect ally in Afghanistan and it has not boded well for the region. Finally, should Obama have put US boots on the ground in Syria? There was phenomenal opposition to that from the public as well as most quarters of the government.

What may be considered a failure, perhaps, of the Obama administration is its pivot to Asia. For all the fanfare, the United States did little to augment its position or those of its allies in Asia. This, in the face of an exertive China in the South China Sea, has raised doubts in the minds of several of the Southeast Asian states. However, America's allies must also realise that their patron has been facing an economic slowdown and finds it difficult to tolerate its allies spending less on defence. Furthermore, Asians do not want to hurt their lucrative economic relations by openly coming out against China and would all prefer that someone else take the tough stand. Even India, the largest and most able of the states in the region, has taken a hesitant posture towards its rival. In this game of 'Who'll bell the dragon?' Beijing has been able to cajole some of its neighbours over to its side. Unless Asian states are willing to step up and do more in a loose partnership with the United States, there is little that Obama or any president can do to actualise a pivot.

A more disappointing foreign policy record is Obama's inaction over Pakistan. Pace its occasional usefulness such as in the ongoing war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan has rarely been of use and usually more of a headache to the United States.

Washington is keen on repeating that Kashmir is the most dangerous flashpoint in the world, but all roads back from that precipice seem to begin with even more Indian restraint in the face of Islamabad's terrorism. The Obama administration has even proceeded with the sale of F-16s to Pakistan in an effort to elicit some cooperation from the country. As Delhi would probably advise, Washington has already tried sama and dana; it is time for some bheda and danda. Obama has instead followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, wringing his hands, condemning, and complaining — in fact, everything short of action — and left the region on a simmer for his successor to handle.

The greatest shortcoming of the Obama regime, one that will likely be reversed as soon as he leaves office, though, is the United States' deteriorating relationship with Russia. Rumbled over Crimea, the Obama White House, urged by his European partners, stumbled into a strong show of force: Nato troops were buttressed and readiness levels improved, sanctions declared against Russia, and diplomatic pressure was brought upon Moscow. Rather than deter Vladimir Putin from pursuing his aims in Europe, these measures have resulted in increased Russian military exercises and missile tests. Worse, it has pushed Moscow into Beijing's arms. Obama's misreading of Russia as a greater threat than China at present is at best wishful thinking, and at worst, uncritical muscle memory from the Cold War. Russia is not the Soviet Union and China, with its powerful economic network across the globe, is a far more dangerous opponent despite its minuscule nuclear arsenal.

Obama's one active error is Russia; the others — Pakistan and Syria — are passive errors of inaction and poor options. However, the president does have Cuba and Iran to boast of, and it is a bonus that Osama bin Laden was killed on his watch. Could he have done things better? Perhaps. Given Donald Trump's bonhomie with Putin, it does not appear there will be any lasting damage from Obama's biggest failure. Islamabad may become a problem in the future but Obama is hardly the president who "lost Pakistan." Syria may haunt him, but on the whole, this is not a bad report card to go away with.