



## IS U.S. FOREIGN POLICY MADE IN THE USA?

By Barry Rubin

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In a New York Times op-ed, President Barack Obama, along with British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Sarkozy explained their policy on Libya in the following words:

“Our duty and our mandate under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 is to protect civilians, and we are doing that. It is not to remove Qaddafi by force.”

But what is UN Security Council Resolution 1973, the document that defines U.S. policy in Libya? It reads:

“Taking note also of the decision of the Council of the League of Arab States of 12 March 2011 to call for the imposition of a no-fly zone on Libyan military aviation, and to establish safe areas in places exposed to shelling as a precautionary measure that allows the protection of the Libyan people and foreign nationals residing in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.”

In other words, the policy of the United States -- and in this case Britain and France -- is based on a UN resolution which, in turn, is based on an Arab League resolution. Or to put it another way, American policy is defined and delimited by the Arab League.

Something truly bizarre and unprecedented has happened in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy: acceptance that it will be made- -- or at least defined -- based on decisions by foreign bodies like the Arab League, International Court, and United Nations rather than by choices made in Washington DC based on U.S. national interests.

To understand truly how strange this new situation is just consider the old and new ways of making U.S. foreign policy.

**The Traditional Method:** There is an evaluation of U.S. national interests, filtered through the analytical, political, and institutional standpoints of different agencies, with the White House as final arbiter. Congress is often consulted and on important matters or those requiring the appropriation of large sums votes a resolution to permit some action being taken. In implementing the policy, the United States seeks the backing and participation of allies. While adjustments can be made to broaden the base of support, the basic parameters and goals of the policy will not be compromised. In other words, the United States acts as a leader and legitimacy is provided by its democratic system and belief that its cause is just.

Now compare that with the new approach: The governments of other countries, institutions like the Arab League and UN, or international conferences, seem to decide what must be done on issues ranging from climate change to Libya, and the United States then falls into line. Congress plays little or no role. This is what the president's supporters euphemistically call “leading from behind.” And it explains why the United States is, in fact, getting further and further behind in the competition for influence and effectiveness in international affairs.

Or consider the sanctions against Iran. Not only were these tailored to what might be accepted but U.S. policymakers gave Russia and China immunity in order to win their votes while Turkey, which opposed the resolution, obtained the same benefit. Trade with Iran through the United Arab Emirates also burgeons and the U.S. government will do nothing about it. These exemptions undermine the sanctions by letting the largest abusers not only continue but dramatically increase their trade with Iran. To be accurate, of course, the U.S. Congress passed tougher sanctions on Iran afterward. But the point is that these only

really apply to the United States while the U.S. government only works to enforce them with close European allies that would do so any way. The important international standard has been set by a least-common-denominator vote at the UN.

Libya is the first American war carried out under this principle. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wanted to explain why the United States was intervening in Libya but not doing anything regarding even greater repression in Syria, she explained:

“Well, if there were a coalition of the international community, if there were the passage of Security Council resolution, if there were a call by the Arab League, if there was a condemnation that was universal—but that is not going to happen....”

On one level, Clinton was creating a straw man, as if it were being suggested the United States launch a military attack on Syria rather than denounce, isolate, and subvert that dictatorship. Yet on another level, she is expressing a passive, non-aggressive theory of U.S. foreign policy in which an essentially passive America awaits instructions from others. Moreover, there is no discussion of American national interests. The United States is purportedly going into Libya because it has a duty to protect civilians there. America thus becomes not the world’s policeman but the world’s social worker or community organizer. Inevitably, intervention must be a selective decision, given the limits on money, troops, and political capital. But as for now that choice will be made not based on U.S. interests but on an international arrest warrant with the rest of the world as the grand jury.

Let’s examine Clinton’s list of justifications:

1. “A coalition of the international community.” Historically, the United States formed and led such coalitions. Here, though, given the Obama Administration’s rejection of such leadership as bullying, imperialistic, and immoral, the coalition is to form spontaneously. Whether the coalition is in line with U.S. interests or not is secondary as is formal support from Congress.

This approach led to the remarkable and unprecedented scene of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates publicly stating that fighting in Libya is not in U.S. interests. The fact is that the Defense Department and armed forces’ leadership views the war as unnecessary and as overstressing American resources. Yet with the “international community” determining the basis for American intervention, these institutions—or even the situation of an American military already fighting two wars—were not taken into account either.

2. “Passage of Security Council resolution.” Whatever respect the U.S. might have for the UN, the passage of a Security Council resolution is, of course, subject to a potential U.S. veto. At any rate, such a resolution has been the end point, not the starting point, of U.S. policy historically. The American goal has been and should be to shape UN Security Council resolutions.

3. “Call by the Arab League.” The Arab League has not been an organization in the past known for its supporting U.S. interests. True, at times—notably in the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis—the Arab League and the United States had parallel views. But the United States should only accept Arab League positions as a basis for its policy when these are first and foremost in U.S. interests. Moreover, if U.S. policy is doing the Arab League a “favor” than some price should be extracted for that assistance rather than the U.S. government owing something to these regimes.

Moreover, the current U.S. government has implied that these governments—the very ones that authorize action against Qadhafi—are themselves illegitimate. In Egypt and Tunisia, where democratic revolutions have supposedly taken place, the countries are run by juntas. Why are these rulers—who include several hostile governments to the United States—suddenly so legitimate when it comes to “ordering” U.S. involvement in a war?

4. “A condemnation that was universal.” The trouble with universal positions is that to get unanimity requires the support of governments that have no good will toward U.S. interests. Therefore, to support such a proposition they must have concluded that the policy is in fact damaging to the United States. They might be correct in that assessment.

When Clinton notes, regarding these four conditions being met on Syria, “That is not going to happen” she unintentionally puts her finger on the problem. In cases where U.S. interests require strong action, the UN, Arab League, international public opinion, and all of the world’s countries are not likely to agree.

The problems that stem from this passive refusal to take leadership is well illustrated by the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) decision to go to the UN to seek a unilateral recognition of independence. In effect, what is happening is that the PA is tearing up agreements negotiated with the United States as guarantor with no fear of U.S. punishment.

The PA is taking the U.S. government at its word. It is building a coalition of the international community, seeking a UN resolution, getting Arab League backing, and building a near-universal condemnation of Israel. Rather than pressure the PA to stop or use energetic methods to build a counter-coalition, the U.S. government has merely announced that it opposes the

move. Yet, after all, the PA is trying to subvert directly agreements based on U.S. sponsorship.

Even when the kinds of principles required by the Obama Administration to have a policy are observed, American policy is still limited by the willingness of other states to implement that policy.

A good example here is the ceasefire to the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war. The United States brokered a deal based on international consensus and a UN resolution to send a large UNIFIL force to prevent Hizballah from remilitarizing southern Lebanon and block arms smuggling from Syria. Indirectly, the strategy was also to strengthen Lebanon's moderate government, even encouraging it to disarm Hizballah. Yet given the lack of strong U.S. leadership and the appeasement orientation of the partners, nothing has been done in five years. More arms have been smuggled than ever.

Again, these steps might be appropriate for military action—which, again, is not the issue here—but let's recall, for example, how President George Bush set U.S. policy on Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and then put together an international coalition on the basis of decisions made on the basis of U.S. national interests. That's the way it's supposed to work. Not the other way around.

Since Syria is an American enemy killing Americans in Iraq and backing terrorist groups to a degree exceeded only by Iran—which is its ally and also an enemy of the United States—why does the U.S. government need an international coalition, UN resolution, Arab League call, and universal condemnation to act?

At any rate, these kind of things certainly do not apply for the United States to take a strong stance of diplomatic opposition, freezing all the concessions this administration has given to Syria, recalling the U.S. ambassador in protest, building an anti-Syria alliance, blocking Syria's takeover of Lebanon, working actively to eliminate Syria's Gaza client, supporting the Syrian opposition and trying to bring down the regime, punishing Syria for its surrogate warfare against the United States in Iraq, and so on.

But instead the kind of thinking this administration all too often represents turns over U.S. power and sovereignty to others.

A similar pattern can be seen in other aspects of U.S. policy, notably that relating to climate change and environmentalism. To an extent never before seen, American decision-making and the setting of standards has been turned over to international bodies and summits. Naturally, other countries compete in making demands for payments from the United States and restrictions on the United States. Another movement—a sign of the broader philosophy though not strictly a foreign policy issue—is one that would surely shock judges of previous generations arguing that foreign laws can serve as a source for American legal judgments.

Every American secretary of state from 1789 onward would be shaken and shocked by such thinking. They would say: No, the United States determines its interests, sets its policy, and implements that policy. Getting international support is an element in that process but it is a byproduct of U.S. interests and decision-making, not the other way around.

It is preferable that the United States act multilaterally if possible, but it is not the precondition for action either. Nor should trying to maximize foreign support require too much watering down of the measures taken or—in the case of the Iran sanctions—smoothing passage by giving exemptions to Russia, China, and other countries thus gutting the sanctions.

Similarly, the U.S. government should not become so obsessed with international popularity and multilateralism as to ignore it when countries stab it in the back, as Turkey's government did on the UN sanctions issue. Nor should it bring situations, as is happening with the unilateral Palestinian independence issue at the UN, in which the United States opposes something as dangerous but doesn't lobby energetically with other countries on it.

During the Cold War, the United States usually acted with coalitions under president after president. Even the supposedly obsessive unilateralist President George W. Bush put together an international coalition to invade Iraq. Yet now broad international support has in many cases become the precondition for U.S. action or indeed formulating a U.S. policy at all. In other cases, the U.S. government refuses to take leadership as if such behavior was a demonstration of high virtue. This kind of thing has become so common as to be accepted without anyone even noticing.

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