

For Your Information

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Foreign policy wasn't the issue that got President Barack Obama re-elected Tuesday, but with upheaval in the Middle East, a war to end in Afghanistan and strained relations with superpowers Russia and China, it's sure to play an outsized role in shaping his legacy as he enters a hard-won second term.

One of Obama's first and most crucial tasks will be naming a successor to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who's vowed to step down after this year. Still reeling from his administration's botched handling of the deadly terrorist attacks on U.S. diplomatic targets in Libya, Obama is no doubt seeking a deft and versatile replacement to guard and advance U.S. interests in a volatile world, especially in the Middle East, where creeping fundamentalism undermines longstanding U.S. influence.

“This so-called Arab Spring has not run its course and, in the short to medium term, and I certainly mean to the end of this decade, I think it’s going to be very tumultuous,” said Richard Armitage, who served as deputy secretary of state under President George W. Bush. “You are going to have volatile, weak leadership governments that are Islamic leaning. That is not necessarily going to end up that way. But it’s going to occupy an increasing amount of our time.”

Among those rumored to be under consideration for the top diplomatic slot are Sen. John Kerry, the Massachusetts Democrat and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon and U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice. Rice’s star has fallen somewhat since her role in spreading incorrect information – she says unwittingly – in the aftermath of the Libya attacks that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American personnel on Sept. 11.

Clinton’s replacement will inherit headaches in virtually every corner of the world: the unresolved debt crisis in Europe, the rise of militant Islamist factions in transitional Arab states, a nuclear showdown with Iran, a moribund Palestinian-Israeli peace process, trade disputes with China, looming wars in Africa, disagreements with Russia over missile defense and Syria, and a backlash to the U.S. drug war in Latin America.

Here’s a closer look at some of the top foreign policy challenges on the horizon for Obama’s second term:

## Syria and the Arab world

The civil war in Syria is the bloodiest offshoot of the Arab Spring rebellions that swept through the region in late 2010 and 2011.

Twenty months into the uprising against President Bashar Assad's regime, U.S. strategy remains enigmatic. The United States won't officially arm the rebels, but it supports regional allies pouring weapons into the battlefield. For months, American diplomats bet on a council of exiles to lead the transition before abruptly dumping them last week in search of "broader representation," especially Syrians actually fighting in the conflict. And yet, U.S. interlocutors still maintain only limited channels to rebel commanders, preferring to deal with the "nonviolent opposition," who enjoy less legitimacy among Syrians.

Allowing the war to continue without acting to end it quickly and decisively has created a vacuum in the region, which could lead to radicalization and far greater extremist influence in Syria itself and to a regional conflict, drawing in Turkey and possibly other countries.

Some American officials say the U.S. reluctance to take the leadership role in Syria is the result of learning the wrong lessons from the Libya engagement; and indeed, the failure of the U.S. and its allies to help assure security after the fall of Moammar Gadhafi resulted in a vacuum that's allowed radical groups to operate openly.

Egypt and Tunisia, two other North African countries that have hit rough patches after much-heralded popular revolts, also are struggling with the rise of the Salafist movement of literalist Islamists. While it's unpopular with Republicans, analysts say, the Obama administration was correct in making overtures to the Muslim Brotherhood, the relatively more moderate Islamist group that won elections in both Egypt and Tunisia.

The administration's willingness to talk to the democratically elected Brotherhood, whose spinoffs include the Palestinian militants of Hamas, also could play a role in reviving the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, the conflict at the root of U.S. unpopularity in the Middle East.

## **Mali**

Obama faces perhaps an equally pressing, if quieter, challenge in Africa, headlined by the vexing crisis in Mali, where al Qaida-linked rebels firmly control two-thirds of the country – an area the size of Texas. U.S. officials agree that the situation requires outside intervention, but Washington is waiting for Africa to produce the ground troops for the effort – a process that will take months, at least, to finalize.

Tiffany Lynch, a senior Africa policy analyst at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan watchdog that makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government, said the Obama administration should focus not only on an immediate military solution to the crisis, but also on the human rights violations and governmental neglect that help turn marginalized groups into dangerous factions as has happened in Nigeria, Somalia and Mali.

“Until the U.S. government really takes a stand on these issues of governance, you’ll see a rise in local religious extremist groups that go on to become regional security concerns,” Lynch said.

The emergence of the Malian safe haven in a region of notoriously weak borders has spiked concerns among U.S. officials that Islamist movements are developing more sophisticated links across the continent, from Mali to Libya to Nigeria to Somalia – all of which until recently had been viewed primarily as isolated problems. Intelligence reports show that even as Somalia’s al Qaida affiliate, al Shabab, is on the verge of being vanquished militarily, its recruitment network across East Africa is growing.

## **Afghanistan**

As he stumped for re-election, Obama reminded his audiences that he’s ending the longest

war in U.S. history through a phased withdrawal that will see all U.S. combat forces out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

There is much, however, that remains unclear or that Obama has yet to decide. Major unknowns: how quickly the remaining 68,000 U.S. combat troops will leave and how many will remain to train and advise the Afghan army and to conduct operations against al Qaida and allied groups based in Pakistan. His new administration also will have to negotiate an accord with Kabul governing the status of any remaining U.S. forces. That could prove difficult.

Obama “needs to be thinking about . . . how quickly we are going to get out of Afghanistan. He’s probably going to do it more quickly than people think but not as quickly as we need,” Armitage said.

Obama’s Afghanistan strategy faces other potential pitfalls.

His approach has been built around a 33,000-strong troop surge into the Taliban’s southern heartland that ended in September and an effort to start peace talks between insurgent leaders and President Hamid Karzai’s government.

The surge hurt the Taliban but failed to extinguish the insurgency, while the peace talks initiative appears to have all but collapsed. Meanwhile, the unpopular Karzai is to leave office after April 2014 presidential elections, corruption remains endemic and a reduction in foreign funds threatens to drive the desperately poor country deeper into poverty.

As a result, there is a real danger that Afghanistan could collapse into all-out civil war even as the U.S.-led international force departs.

Obama's strategy also will hinge on relations with nuclear-armed Pakistan, whose cooperation is critical to the U.S. pullout. Yet Islamabad, which officially is a U.S. ally, has different strategic goals in Afghanistan, including preventing rival India from gaining influence in Kabul.

U.S.-Pakistan ties are recovering from a series of mishaps and a U.S. refusal to halt pilotless drone attacks on terrorist targets inside Pakistan that drove relations to their iciest level since the founding of Pakistan in 1947. But relations remain cool, encumbered by serious differences, and it remains unclear how Obama will address them.

## **Iran**

Perhaps no foreign policy issue will demand more of Obama's attention and energy – and almost immediately – than the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, which threatens to ignite a conflict that could send petroleum prices soaring, driving the world economy into a tailspin and derailing the fragile U.S. recovery.

Intense U.S., European and U.N. sanctions are hurting Iran's oil-dependent economy. But the Islamic republic persists in defying demands that it stop enriching uranium, which it says is for civilian uses and Western powers and Israel charge is part of a covert nuclear weapons program.

Despite deadlocked negotiations, both the Obama administration and Iran appear eager to restart multilateral talks, which could resume later this month. Obama has resisted pressure from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to launch military strikes at Iranian nuclear facilities, saying there is more time to reach a political resolution before Iran acquires enough low-enriched uranium to transform into fuel for a warhead.

Some experts see the outline of a deal: Iran would halt its enrichment of uranium to 20 percent, ship its existing stocks abroad and shutter its deeply buried Fordow production facility in return for an irreversible lifting of sanctions after each step.

"I think the problem is one of sequencing," said Alireza Nader of the RAND Corp., a research institute. "We have to see now if Iran will be willing to take certain steps to build international

confidence. Is there potential for it? Yes, because the regime is facing a lot of pressure.”

It would take action, however, by a pro-Israel Congress to permanently lift U.S. sanctions, restricting Obama’s deal-making ability. And Iran’s regime is divided between factions jostling for power in the run-up to presidential elections next year.

Moreover, other factors could interfere. They include the Syrian civil war, in which Iran is supporting the Assad regime and the Obama administration is providing cautious backing to the rebels.

## **China**

Despite the sharp words for China and its economic policies during the campaign, the Obama administration’s approach toward Beijing likely will continue the same delicate back and forth as in years prior. The official tapped to take over as both China’s president and general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, is not expected to radically alter Beijing’s position.

The two nations share both a significant trade relationship – \$539 billion in goods and services last year alone – and a wide range of geopolitical disagreements. Close to home, Beijing has accused Washington of interfering in the region during simmering territorial disputes with its neighbors over the South China Sea. The United States is pushing for multilateral negotiations between China and those with rival claims, while Chinese officials would rather deal on a bilateral basis with its weaker neighbors.

China has sharp disagreement, too, with Japan about a group of islands in the East China Sea, another situation that Beijing has told Washington to stay out of.

With greater Chinese clout in the region, U.S. ties with allies in the area like Japan, South Korea and the Philippines have grown closer – sparking accusations from China that America is pursuing a policy of containment. The Obama administration's much discussed policy of a "pivot" toward Asia has only enhanced those concerns.

## **Europe**

Compared with the dimensions of potential problems in the Middle East, Europe's continuing economic crisis, the result of structural flaws in setting up the euro currency zone coupled with the world banking and credit crises, seems like an issue that's within the realm of resolution.

Almost in spite of themselves, and certainly in spite of domestic public opinion, German and other West European leaders now have a clear sense of what's working and what's not in resolving the still growing economic crises in Mediterranean euro countries, such as Greece, Italy and Spain, and what institutional reforms are needed to restore the continent to economic growth.

But the crisis will continue for at least the next several years.

Contributing to this report were Roy Gutman in Doha, Qatar, Tom Lasseter in Beijing, and special correspondents Alan Boswell in Nairobi, Kenya, and Sheera Frenkel in Jerusalem.

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