

The Janus-Faced Presidency: Barack Obama, Syria, and the Demise of Closet Realism

By Dr. John C. Hulsman

Unlike the case for the vast majority of their gods, the Roman deity Janus has no Greek equivalent, being distinctively part and parcel of the unique experience of the greatest of empires. Traditionally depicted as having two faces looking both to the past as well as the future, Janus is the god of transitions, being closely associated with gates, doors, and walkways. Given all the many ups and downs of Roman history, his duality served the topsy-turvy fortunes of his patrons well, explaining both the continuity of passing time as well as highlighting dramatic changes in fortunes as merely being part of history's norm.

Beyond showing off my classical British education, why on earth would I begin a piece on the collapse of Barack Obama's foreign policy with such a disquisition? As ever, the ancients have answers as to what ails us today. At the moment, analysts of all stripes are having a terrible time assessing what the White House is up to, with conventional wisdom coming round to the conclusion that the President's foreign policy has come to grief because of its lack of focus, and its seemingly zigzagging randomness. However, as Polonius observed of the ostensibly erratic Hamlet, 'There is method in his madness.'

Janus (and my April 2103 article on The Closet Realist Foreign Policy of Barack Obama for *Limes*) explains away the confusion. For the tragic reality is that Barack Obama has failed not because his foreign policy has lacked direction. On the contrary, it has failed because he has resolutely adhered to a Closet Realist strategy that has finally become unhinged, collapsing due to the weight of the dangers of pursuing such a foreign policy. To even begin to understand what has been going on, this central and unexamined core of American foreign policy under Obama must be grasped.

While it is easy to see why so many have been confused over the past month by the President's seeming inconsistency, the Janus-faced nature of Obama's Closet Realist foreign policy provides us with a Rosetta Stone for evaluating not only what has been going on, but an answer as to why American policy has gone so very wrong.

The coherence of Closet Realism

Despite the many critics who claim the president does not think strategically, but like most Chicago politicians concentrates exclusively on tactics, upon close inspection there is no doubt an overall plan can be discovered. The Closet Realist strategy goes something like this. Like a bad bank, America must wind down the foreign policy excesses of George W. Bush, exiting the quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan--not really caring what is left standing politically after the American exit--and striving to avoid at all costs any new foreign policy entanglements that can come back to haunt America. That practically means 'Leading From Behind' in Libya (doing as little militarily as possible and eschewing nation-building) and avoiding the Syrian civil war like the plague. As the President has ruefully commented during his recent television address, 'I was elected to end wars, not to start them.'

Instead, as former National Security Advisor Tom Donilon made clear, America must pivot to Asia, spending more time, effort, and resources on the fastest growing region in the world, and the only one capable of providing a new long-term motor for future economic growth. For if Asia for the Obama team is the goose that just might lay the golden egg, this comforting assumption remains far from an inevitable conclusion.

To reap the economic prize, a number of formidable foreign policy landmines must be defused, principally involving managing the rise of China, as well as mitigating tensions between the Beijing, Delhi, and Tokyo, the three great

semi-antagonistic regional powers loose in the region. If the reward is glittering, defusing tensions in the East China Sea and along the loosely demarcated border between India and China amounts to a full-time job. Winning around Secretaries of Defense Gates and Panetta, as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Donilon's Asia Pivot became the one genuinely new strategic gambit of the Obama White House, a new idea that—for good or ill--actually attempted to explain the world as the White House found it. This amounts to a critical aspect of the Closet Realist strategy.

The sub-text of the Asia Pivot was clear as well: Do as little as possible in the sinkhole of the Middle East. With the Arab Spring turning abruptly to Winter (especially in pivotal Cairo), Damascus on fire, Israeli-Palestinian Final Status talks going nowhere, and Iran seemingly intent on acquiring a nuclear capability, the region was one of only peril, which could easily derail Obama's overall foreign policy, but could do precious little to advance it. Problems there need to be managed, but little was likely to be solved; better that the emphasis shift to Asia, a continent where creative American diplomacy might well make a positive difference and which was economically the future.

Two salient and incontrovertible facts underlie this coherent strategy. First, it acknowledges (despite the President's rather lukewarm rhetorical efforts to re-assert American exceptionalism) the relative global decline in American power, while at the same time reaffirming the paradoxical reality that even a declining America by a long ways remains the greatest single power in the dawning multipolar age. America could no longer do everything and certainly not on its own; Iraq will historically be seen as the high-water mark of feckless unilateralism. Nevertheless, if America made rational strategic choices about what really matters, it can still largely set the terms for the new multipolar era, and do so in a creative way that makes a profound difference.

Secondly, the Obama White House is acutely aware its mission—the reason it won two presidential elections—is to concentrate on what the President rightly calls ‘nation-building at home.’ Americans have helplessly watched as over a trillion dollars has gone down the plughole over faraway Iraq, all the while American schools, roads, and bridges deteriorated, and with the global economic system itself exploding. Barack Obama’s election signified the determination of the country to right its own ills, rather than serving as democracy policeman for a confusing and ungrateful world.

Looking at this summary, it is hard to refute that at its core—astonishingly—the supposedly ultra-left-wing (by American standards, at least) President has been nothing more than a Closet Realist, reconfiguring American foreign policy by stealth to more accurately reflect its genuine power position in a rapidly changing world and re-defining its core interests to make sense of that world. All this is admirable and makes much sense, but begs answering a confounding question:

‘Why in the world did the realist Obama administration almost sleepwalk to war in Syria?’

The answer is that as true for all strategies, Closet Realism has its inherent dangers. Obama and his first-term foreign policy staff (Secretaries of Defense Gates and Panetta, National Security Advisor Donilon, and yes, even Secretary of State Clinton) were all committed to his Closet Realist Strategy; the same cannot be said for the mainstream of the Democratic Party Foreign Policy Elite or for staunch second-term Wilsonians such as Secretary of State John Kerry, National Security Advisor Susan Rice or UN Ambassador Samantha Power.

As such, the President has spent his administration both obscuring his realist strategy and throwing bones to his Wilsonian base, foreign policy maximalists who have been perpetually annoyed by his decidedly more minimalist stance. Both tactics make eminent sense in getting through the day, obviating the need for

internecine warfare within the Democratic Party that could only hurt the White House, even if it emerged triumphant. But obscuring reality, as we have seen in spades over the case of Syria, is itself a colossal risk.

But Syria is merely the latest example of this overall trend. The earlier Afghan surge provides a textbook account of Closet Realism in action, with the President yet again quietly acting like a realist, while loudly sympathizing with the more maximalist elements in his own party—the Humanitarian Intervention crowd—as well as the foreign-policy-on-steroids neoconservatives who incredibly still dominate the Republican Party.

While coming round to realist conclusions on foreign policy again and again, President Obama was also acutely aware that realism remains a decidedly minority point of view in both parties, dominated as they still are by more utopian Wilsonian and neocon leanings. This is the political context that made Closet Realism—a Janus-faced strategy predicated on acting like a realist while talking like a Wilsonian—seem like such an imperative for the White House over Afghanistan and much else besides.

Afghanistan: Closet Realism in Action

There is no doubt that the White House had little faith that a surge in American troops fighting the Taliban—a policy urged on him by both Wilsonians and Neocons—would not produce any sort of success in Afghanistan. Worse, if the most ardent maximalist champions of such a strategy were heeded, Afghanistan could fully become ‘Son of Iraq,’ disastrously upending the hoped-for Asia pivot, and Obama’s central focus on mitigating Bush’s foreign policy disasters and instead concentrating on renewing America. But aware of the unholy left-right foreign policy alliance for upping the ante in Afghanistan, the president settled on his surge strategy, a textbook Closet Realist policy.

Blandly (and very cleverly) appointing David Petraeus—the maximalist savior in Iraq—as new Afghan military chief, the White House shackled its Republican enemies to the surge policy. At the same time as agreeing to a modest increase in troops, the President (very quietly) set time limits for both the Surge and America leaving Afghanistan itself. While seeming to go along with the maximalists, in reality the President was stealthily following a realist policy path, hastening the end of American military involvement in the endless war itself.

By providing a strict time limit for the Surge, the President made certain that—whatever the outcome—he was in a win-win situation. If Petraeus worked miracles and the Surge somehow succeeded, Obama would be lauded across the American political spectrum as a foreign policy visionary. If—as was far more likely—the Surge accomplished nothing of substance, the President had trapped his enemies into supporting a policy that finally limited the timeframe for both the Surge and for American military involvement in Afghanistan itself. Tactically, Inside the Beltway, the Afghan ploy was brilliant. However, a Janus-faced Closet Realist strategy based on such fundamental misdirection was creating enduring hostages to fortune, a reality that worked out far less well over Syria.

The Clarity of Syria

From a realist point of view, it is hard to imagine a conflict less worth fighting than the present Syrian Civil War. Almost exactly a year ago, the President came to the entirely correct conclusion that American military intervention in the gruesome Syrian Civil War was emphatically not in American interests. For this intervention simply does not make a lot of sense in terms of American interests, the strategic realities on the ground in Syria, or in terms of what the American people clearly want.

It is a well-known adage of living in Washington that quite often people get into trouble for telling the unvarnished truth. While a Senator during World War

II, future president Harry S. Truman found himself in such a spot. After listening intently to expert descriptions about the titanic struggle in the east between Stalin and Hitler, Truman's telling comment (which predictably got him into trouble) was, 'Can we sell arms to both sides?'

The brutal reality is that such a strategy applied today suits western interests to the ground. Arrayed on one side we have the butcher Assad, with his thuggish Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guard allies. It is hard to think of another grouping that so stands in the way of long-term western interests.

But that is to overlook the composition of the rebels. As a recent IHS/Jane's report makes devastatingly clear, that these are not freedom fighters in the mold of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. Rather, out of around 100,000 insurgents, around 45,000 are directly affiliated with al-Qaeda or other local radical Islamist parties; this is a fact that should be shouted from the rooftops.

Further, as the civil war has evolved, by far the most effective forces fighting Assad are the most radical, directly linked to al-Qaeda; as such, bombing Assad will help them, not something one would think America ought to be doing. Leading fighters in Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham are radical Islamists directly tied to the perpetrators of 9/11.

In other words—and almost beyond the ability of American maximalists to comprehend—there are simply no good guys here, no one to get behind. As ever, Washington (especially Secretary of State Kerry) has been wandering around looking for unicorns, in this case worthy, tolerant, freedom fighters. To put it mildly, they are not to be found in Syria. Rather, the rational calculation is to let Assad/Iran/Hezbollah and al-Qaeda fight on and on and on. Rarely has a morass so served western interests.

National interest calculations counseling non-involvement are entirely supported by the vast majority of the American people. Military involvement in Syria (outside of Washington) is a war no one in America wants. The last ten years have been littered with examples (Iraq and Afghanistan come to mind) of the foreign policy elite loftily ignoring their countrymen, only to be proven grievously wrong.

A revealing Ipsos/Reuters poll, taken after the horrible pictures of the chemical attack in the Damascus suburbs began to trickle in, is decisive. Sixty percent of the 1448 people polled said Obama should do nothing in Syria, despite the chemical attack; only a miniscule 9% (that's not a typo) said America was now compelled to act.

Let's not forget Americans (and the American military elite for that matter) are war-weary for a reason. For a decade trillions of dollars and thousands of lives have been thrown away for precious little gain. The American public seems to remember what the foreign policy elite has so conveniently and incredibly forgotten. This is folly of the worst order. The President is aware of all this, but found himself trapped between the Scylla of maximalist Washington and the Charybdis of far more cautious American public opinion. The political strains on Closet Realism began to tell.

If national interest calculations decisively lead to the conclusion that western intervention is a nonsense, the paltry likely impact of military intervention furthers the tale. Espousing the predictable Wilsonian faux moralism of doing things to feel good (rather than actually doing good), not even the most committed American maximalist can sensibly explain what a successful American intervention would look like.

With most, including the White House, (thank goodness) ruling out a significant number of American boots on the ground, all other military options look

laughable. America letting loose some cruise missiles from offshore, along with limited air strikes and drone attacks, would merely confirm Washington's impotence, as such an intervention does absolutely nothing to change the strategic calculation on the ground. At present the military story of Syria is simple: Assad's loathsome regime was tottering until his allies Iran and Hezbollah decisively bolstered him. Nothing the United States has been contemplating changes this basic fact.

Even allowing for a miraculous turning of the strategic tide, practically executing any successful strategy on the ground in Syria looks impossible, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey made admirably clear during recent Congressional testimony, when he forthrightly said he did not know what success looked like. Syria is a devilishly complex mosaic of ethnic and religious groups, one that makes putting Iraq back together again look like child's play in comparison. So no interests, no clear mission, no in-country allies, no real chance of success.

Finally and most importantly, jumping into the Syrian fire had the potential to entirely undo the Closet Realist foreign policy strategy of the past five years, embroiling America in yet another war of choice, focusing on the Middle East instead of Asia, and imperiling the White House's strongly domestic focus. On realist merits, staying out of Syria is a no-brainer.

Syria as Closet Realism's Waterloo

But fatefully, in line with Closet Realism, even as he sensibly decided to stay out of Syria for very good realist reasons, Obama again felt—in his Janus-faced way--the need to give a consolation prize to his Wilsonian base. When pressed a year ago if his decision was final, Obama added a lawyerly caveat. If Assad were to prove even more ghastly to his people and say, gas them (as though killing tens of thousands of his countryman were somehow more gentlemanly) he would

reconsider. The whole point of the ‘promise’ is that it was made in the certainty that it would never have to be acted upon; it wasn’t about policy but about the politics of tending to his disappointed Humanitarian Intervention base.

Imagine the White House’s astonishment when a year on—Like Frankenstein’s Monster—the straw man came to life, with Assad barbarically gassing hundreds in a suburb of Damascus. This tactical political ploy at the heart of Obama’s Closet Realist strategy is the undoubted context to all that has happened over these past tumultuous days, with the White House just avoiding war over a promise they never believed that under any circumstances they would have to honor. With Assad calling his bluff, suddenly the emperor was very much not wearing any clothes.

Fed up with Republican sniping, the White House concocted a cynical political strategy over Syria that at first glance seems ingenious: Force Republican lawmakers to partially own the Syrian campaign by making them vote to give the president leave to attack Syria. If Republicans vote ‘yes’ they are on board with the president. If they vote ‘no’ and Syria gets worse (as it may well do) they are the cause of American inaction in the face of barbarism.

But the White House miscalculated. What if a majority of Republicans (especially in the House) voted as their constituents pressured them to do? For in his unvarnished elitism, President Obama wholly discounted American public opinion, which—after Iraq and Afghanistan—is running sharply against any form of intervention. The latest polling by the Pew Research Center makes for startling reading. As of September 1st, fewer than 30% favor US air strikes, with a whopping 50% against. 75% of those polled think intervention would create a backlash against the US and allies, 60% fear it will lead to a long-term military commitment in Syria, and half are convinced such a course will prove ineffective in discouraging chemical weapon use. Well, quite.

In terms of a Wilsonian base in love with the siren song of international consensus being a prerequisite for American military action, Obama's Syrian policy was becoming a nightmare. The UN did not matter. The Arab League did not matter. Tried and true ally Britain did not matter. The American House of Representatives (highly likely to heed the voters and reject Obama's request) did not matter, with even the Senate likely to vote against the President's wishes. A political and policy calamity loomed directly ahead of the White House, which had boxed itself into a perilous corner. All these august bodies had decided (or were in the process of deciding) not to intervene in Syria, and all would have been blithely ignored by an executive whose tone-deafness was making George W. Bush look like an empath. Three-plus years of a lame duck presidency loomed ahead.

A Very Ghoulish Savior

Two notable failures—US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russia—then came to the rescue, dramatically transforming the Syria crisis. John Kerry, a man who could not beat George W. Bush despite the Iraq War, may well have committed one of the more beneficial rhetorical stumbles of all time. Living up to his Washington reputation as being serenely intellectually overconfident and almost limitlessly verbose (an occupational curse for anyone with a record of long term service in the Senate), Kerry's mocking suggestion in London--that the Assad government could escape American air strikes if it surrendered its chemical weapons stockpile--was instantly seized upon by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as a way to avoid war.

More importantly for Vladimir Putin, such a stumble is a way to further Russian interests. The Assad family is a long-time client; an ill-thought-through American air strike, while on its own changing nothing, could easily further drag America directly into the Syrian morass, which would prove disastrous for Russia, given that the Syrian government is now winning the civil war.

The Kremlin simply cannot afford any further geostrategic setbacks. Putin's Russia, far from belonging to the booming BRIC world, is in terminal decline, with horrendous demographic problems, plagued by endemic corruption and proving to be a one-trick economic pony, wholly dependent of the spot price of oil and natural gas; this in the face of the coming fracking revolution. It is an open question if over the medium term it will even be able to remain a great power at all.

But crucially Putin clearly understands Russian national interests and has no domestic constituencies to really worry about regarding foreign policy. He has taken advantage of Kerry's blunder and the world's geostrategic vacuum to punch well above his weight.

Putin, knowing President Obama wants no part of the Syrian morass, has no qualms about throwing American do-gooders a bone over Syria regarding chemical weapons (though carrying out an action plan to get rid of them will prove fiendishly difficult in practice) as long as his primary medium-term goals (the Assad regime's survival and with it Russian influence) are undisturbed by this gesture politics.

The Devil Is In The Details

Yet it is painfully evident that the agreement reached over Syria's chemical weapons by Washington and Moscow in Geneva is so much less than meets the eye. The accord imposes unbelievably quick deadlines for the Assad regime to meet. Almost immediately, Syria is to submit a complete list of its chemical facilities. It is to provide immediate and unfettered access to sites by international inspectors, with all the weapons being destroyed by mid-2014. The regime is to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), giving UN inspectors the legal backing to investigate Syrian compliance.

Each of these points is remarkably easy to dispose of in short order. Initially Assad was already backtracking on signing the CWC, demanding that he would do

so only if America forswears any future use of force against him, stops sending arms to the rebels, and if archenemy Israel signs on to the convention as well. The lightning pace of the whole process stands absolutely no chance of working without the complete and enthusiastic backing of the Syrian regime. This does not appear to be forthcoming.

Second, there is the overwhelming and far too little commented upon fact that this whole process is taking place in conditions that could almost not be worse. With civil war raging all around them, the chaos surely makes it impossible for the inspectors to destroy Syria's chemical weapons program in such short order. But even if all the Herculean obstacles I've mentioned were somehow overcome by demigods, does any of this strategically matter?

At this more important strategic level, the chemical weapons controversy is not the central point. What Putin has managed to do is this: He has secured the high likelihood that America will not become militarily embroiled in the Syrian morass. As such, one of two fixed outcomes remains plausible--either Assad wins outright or the country is partitioned *de facto*, with the regime retaining control in the east of the country along the coast. Russia and its client can live with either one; now nothing will upset this favorable (for them) strategic reality.

For President Obama, poor Monopoly player that he is, the Geneva deal amounts to a Get Out of Jail Free Card. He is no longer a prisoner of his own self-defeating Olympian rhetoric, foisted upon him by his Closet Realist strategy. Geneva lets him off the hook of starting a war the President is sensible enough to desperately want to avoid. Likewise, he escapes from the congressional vote over the crisis, which would surely have amounted to a stunning repudiation in the House and quite possibly the Senate, crippling the three long years that remain of his presidency. For the Obama White House, the deal has little to do with facts on the ground in Syria, and a great deal to do with what goes on in Washington.

But no amount of face saving can hide the fact that something important has been revealed here. In maximalist, Wilsonian tones wholly unrelated to limited real world concerns, the President has grandly pronounced that Assad must go and he must not gas his people or there would be Jovian repercussions; to put it mildly, there have not been. Rather than placating his Wilsonian base, in his Closet Realist bluff being called in Syria, Obama is in the process of enraging them if the unworkable chemical weapons accord fails.

The obvious disconnect between American rhetoric and reality is coming as an excruciatingly painful shock for the American foreign policy elite, who almost to a man supports American maximalist positions. Rather than questioning those positions as they should be doing, it is proving far easier to blast the Obama White House for somehow lessening American power abroad, rather than seeing that the White House has been quietly making necessary realist adjustments to America living in the new multipolar era. Obama's sin was in quietly and somewhat duplicitously furthering Closet Realist policies, not in adopting them in the first place. With Syria, the Janus-faced Closet Realist Strategy that has characterized the Obama presidency has decisively run its course.

That is not to say that America is not the most powerful country in the world (it is), or that America will not remain so for the foreseeable future (it will). Given the coming shale revolution and a host of other real and enduring advantages the future is still very much America's. But history is not inevitable; this will only happen if its leaders wake up to the fact that we live in different and challenging times requiring a fundamentally different foreign policy, based on the world as we actually find it. The time has come for the foreign policy realism Obama has so quietly championed to be openly discussed in the democratic commons. Once the dust from Syria settles, now, above all, would be the time for the President to openly announce why realism fits the times we live in and save his presidency.

*--Dr. John C. Hulsman is President and Co-Founder of John C. Hulsman Enterprises (www.john-hulsman.com), a successful global political risk consulting firm. A life member of the Council on Foreign Relations, he is also the author of all or part of 10 books, including Amazon bestsellers *Ethical Realism*, *The Godfather Doctrine*, and most recently an acclaimed intellectual biography of Lawrence of Arabia, *To Begin the World Over Again*. Hulsman is a contributing editor and writes regularly for *Limes*.*