



Obama 2.0: the new foreign policy team

by Eva Gross

The twin appointments of Susan Rice (as national security advisor) and Samantha Power (as US ambassador to the UN) render the line-up of the foreign policy team under the second Obama administration nearly complete. Together with other recent or imminent appointments at the State Department, they allow for a first assessment not only of the foreign policy themes and priorities likely to shape the second Obama administration, but also of their implications for EU-US relations.

All the president's (wo)men

Both Rice and Power have distinguished records in foreign policy inside and outside the US government. Susan Rice served as US ambassador to the United Nations under the first Obama administration, after leaving her position at the Brookings Institution to join the Obama campaign in 2008. Long a front-runner for the post of secretary of state, she withdrew her name following Republican questioning of her role in an alleged cover-up over the attack on the US embassy in Benghazi.

Samantha Power, another early supporter of President Obama's 2008 campaign, is a former journalist, human rights advocate and Pulitzer-Prize winning author (2002) of the book on US responses to genocide: *A Problem from Hell*. Power, who also founded Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, worked on the transition team and later became director for multilateral affairs and human rights at the National Security Council under the first Obama administration.

These appointments signal that the president has rewarded loyalty and performance displayed during his first term. Given their 'liberal interventionist' credentials, they also hint at a stronger normative emphasis in US foreign policy. This could lead to an increased scope for value-driven concerns - in addition to 'traditional' foreign policy aims - coupled with a strengthened profile for the UN in US foreign policy. To some, this suggests that arguments for a more active approach in the protection of human rights and prevention of genocide will more easily find the president's ear - in part also because Obama may be less concerned with balancing outside interests during his second term - thus influencing the course of US foreign policy. The two appointments also indicate that decision-making is now more than ever concentrated in the White House and among the president's inner circle - although it is worth keeping in mind that, while the post of national security advisor does not require Senate confirmation, that of US ambassador to the UN does.

Neither appointment, however, will necessarily translate into an automatic or foreseeable shift in the US position when it comes to concrete policies. To start with, the functions of national security advisor - while including regular access and provision of advice to the president - entails also (and perhaps especially) managing inter-agency processes and competing bureaucracies with a view to ensuring the delivery of appropriate information to support the decision-making process. More importantly, making decisions ultimately lies with the president himself - and Obama has consistently

shown a propensity towards caution and pragmatism, as well as towards reaching his own conclusions. This has been the case, so far, also with the most pressing humanitarian concern and potential cause for intervention, the civil war in Syria.

Seen from the vantage point of the shift from the first administration, appointing loyalists - rather than a prudent mix of former competitors and old hands familiar (or influential) with the Pentagon or Congress - means that, in his second term, President Obama is to be less swayed (or bound) by opposing forces.

What about Foggy Bottom?

Other impending and actual foreign policy appointments largely complement the focus of these two prominent nominations. Taken together, the new appointees to both National Security Staff and State Department suggest an approach that, at first glance, seems unlikely to lead to a tug-of-war over competences and priorities between White House and the State Department.

Positions on Syria, to start with, are beginning to display a growing convergence. Both Kerry and Rice, along with Power, advocate a more interventionist position, and this could sway the president to depart from the hands-off approach he has taken to date. In fact, Obama is likely to alter his attitude if convincing arguments were presented or new developments on the ground were to make intervention a more appropriate policy option.

For his part, Secretary of State John Kerry has shown a preference for a stronger focus on traditional diplomacy and US core policy priorities, and a much more cautious approach towards engaging the military in direct foreign interventions - incidentally, an approach shared by Secretary of Defense (and former Republican senator) Chuck Hagel. These priorities include transatlantic relations and an emphasis on Afghanistan and the Middle East. The appointment of experienced diplomats equally indicates a primarily political and pragmatic approach towards foreign policy, and a return of a transatlantic orientation - while keeping in place the strategic shift, or 'rebalancing', towards Asia.

A European pivot

President Obama has also nominated Victoria Nuland as assistant secretary of state for Europe. She is set to replace Philip Gordon, who will be

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joining the National Security Staff as special assistant to the president and White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf region. A former US ambassador to NATO in the second Bush administration (at a time of mending fences after the divisions over Iraq, and of fledgling cooperation between NATO and the EU), Nuland is well-versed in transatlantic relations. However, her involvement in the Benghazi crisis - as state department spokeswoman at the time - and Republican suspicions over the alleged cover-up suggest that her confirmation process may be bumpy. Despite Senator John McCain's endorsement, Nuland is likely to face questions on her (and the previous administration's) role in the 2012 attack on the US embassy in Libya.

As for other policy areas which involve close transatlantic cooperation, the appointment of James Dobbins as special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to highlight a focus on political and civilian (rather than military-driven) concerns for the duration of the second Obama administration. This is rather important also with regards to the impending challenges of the presidential election and political transition in Kabul in 2014. Dobbins possesses solid experience regarding Afghanistan, having served as the Bush administration's representative to the Afghan opposition and represented the US at the 2001 International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn before his move to RAND, where he became director of the International Security and Defence Policy Center.

Dobbins also served as assistant secretary of state for Europe and ambassador to the European Community. Along with Phil Gordon and Victoria Nuland, his appointment means that, on issues of transatlantic concern, the current appointees bring long-standing familiarity and knowledge (in addition to administrative experience) to their posts. For the EU, these appointments signal a liberal interventionist and Atlanticist bias.

During President Obama's second term, the EU can thus build on these long-standing personal ties as well as on the substantial political and bureaucratic cooperation of the 'comprehensive approach' under the first Obama administration. At the same time, Brussels also needs to be careful not to appear complacent, as perceptions of insufficient burden-sharing across the Atlantic remain strong in Washington.

Eva Gross is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

