

Hillary Clinton's Legacy at State

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In any administration, the White House ultimately determines foreign policy. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's legacy has to be judged with that in mind.

In addition to her often-lauded intelligence and tirelessness, historians are likely to remember Clinton as someone who wanted America to lead from the front but whose concrete diplomatic achievements were elusive. Surveying the diplomatic outcomes of the last four years, one sees an activist secretary of state whose policy instincts often were not shared by the White House.

Clinton had clear diplomatic success in Burma. It's too soon to tell on other initiatives, including the "pivot to Asia," Libya and Iran. And in some cases, she'll be remembered for what was not accomplished, most notably the Arab Spring and Afghanistan.

Clinton, according to State Department officials, was a key advocate of opening diplomatic relations with Burma after the regime began reforms. After initial resistance from White House staff, President Obama supported Clinton, and she made a historic trip to the country in December 2011.

While Clinton championed the pivot to Asia as a thoughtful strategic approach to rebalance U.S. focus more in keeping with geo-strategic reality, its unfortunate name raised the hackles of allies, and it has been perceived in the region as largely military in character. This perception may have emboldened smaller Southeast Asian nations to push back on China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Clinton's forceful diplomacy on this issue was helpful: She kept open communication lines with China while clearly stating that the United States is watching China's actions and that it considers the disputed Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea to be covered by the U.S. defense treaty with Japan.

Yet the strategy was hampered substantially by the Obama administration's lack of a regional trade agenda. U.S. economic ties to Asia must be strong if we are to maintain a balanced influence. Belatedly, the United States is promoting the Trans Pacific Partnership — a Bush administration trade initiative with several Asian nations — but the high standards the United States has set will make success difficult.

Success in Libya is similarly undetermined. The military intervention — which Clinton only cautiously supported — was initially a success. As the tragic deaths of four Americans in Benghazi shows, however, it is unclear whether moderates and democracy ultimately will prevail.

On Iran, Clinton's 40-plus trips to Europe helped produce crippling new sanctions on that country. Clinton certainly deserves credit for this resolute diplomacy. Unfortunately,

Iran's continued intransigence makes it unlikely that the sanctions alone will cause Iran to give up its nuclear program.

On two crucial issues — the Arab Spring and Afghanistan — Clinton's tenure likely will be remembered for what was not accomplished.

Since the Arab Spring of 2011, when people across the Middle East rose up to demand democracy, the United States has sat on the sidelines without a clear strategy, especially for the key countries in the region: Egypt and Syria.

After watching Syria disintegrate into civil war, U.S. Gen. David Petraeus and Clinton drafted a plan last summer to vet rebel groups and train and supply fighters who could be U.S. allies in a post-Assad Syria. Their plans were blocked by the White House. Thus Syria's civil war continues unabated, and hardliners financed by Qatar, Wahhabists from Saudi Arabia and others are pushing out moderates. In Egypt, Clinton has become highly unpopular with moderates, because they believe that the Obama administration has done little to support their efforts to establish a real democracy, either by pushing President Mohamed Morsi to compromise with his opposition or by delivering aid to help solidify democratic gains. Far from the more proactive diplomacy of President George H.W. Bush at the end of the Cold War, which helped reunify Germany within NATO and establish democracies across Central and Eastern Europe, Clinton's legacy on the Arab Spring is one largely of inaction.

Finally, Clinton was resolutely engaged in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Insiders say that she strongly advocated keeping more troops in Afghanistan than the United States is contemplating now. If the United States does largely pull out in 2014, it will be hard to sustain economic aid to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and at least the southern Afghan provinces are likely to once again slip into conflict or Taliban hands. This would undermine not only our counterterrorism efforts, and leave those whose hopes we raised by intervening with lasting bitterness, but also would undermine the soft power issues that Clinton so ably championed worldwide: women's rights, antipoverty initiatives and increased transparency.

In fairness, no single person can be responsible for a diplomatic breakthrough, and the complexity and speed of today's foreign policy means that triumphs on the order of the Camp David accords are often elusive. Clinton was a talented and responsible Cabinet member: She had strong views and made them known internally, but when her views did not prevail, she publicly supported the president. A President Hillary Clinton might have pursued a more robust foreign policy than she was permitted to do as secretary of state.

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