

The Commentator
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About that “flexibility,” Mr. President
By Lawrence J. Haas

Dear President Obama,

With your re-election in hand, you’ll now have some of that second-term “flexibility” on foreign policy that you had discussed earlier this year with outgoing Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

You’ll be glad to have it. Because you will need Congress for major domestic initiatives, and because you’re already a lame duck, you’ll likely do what other second-term Presidents have done – turn to the global stage where you can serve largely unimpeded as America’s commander-in-chief and top diplomat.

But, if you have flexibility, Mr. President, then I urge you to use it well. Flexibility offers opportunities that extend far beyond the conventional approaches to crafting regional alliances, spearheading peace treaties, and imposing sanctions on outlaw nations. So, “think outside the box.”

Flexibility also offers you another chance to deploy perhaps the most powerful tool at your disposal – your public voice – to make clear what the United States believes and the values by which it seeks to operate.

You have spoken this way on occasion, such as in your inaugural address in which you reminded Americans of their founding roots, in Oslo in late 2009 in perhaps your finest foreign policy address, and at the State Department in early 2011 in which you seemed to apply a version of the Truman and Bush Doctrines to your goal of supporting “transitions to democracy” in the greater Middle East.

But, over the course of your first term, you spoke like that more episodically than consistently and, in your approach to challenges in that region and elsewhere, you have seemed to operate as more a valueless realist than a freedom-avowing optimist.

Over the next four years, with the “Arab uprising” taking its uncertain path, Israeli-Iranian confrontation a growing possibility, Palestinian-Israeli war always looming, China rising, Russia seeking a resurgence, and pundits predicting America’s decline, you can elevate our values and remind domestic and global audiences that America remains history’s most powerful force for freedom and democracy.

So, with flexibility, you can start by praising Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas privately – and publicly, if that would help – for suggesting recently that, to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace, he’d drop the unrealistic demand for a full “right of return” for all Palestinian refugees.

In the aftermath of Palestinian protests against Abbas' salvo, he backed off, saying he was only talking about his own aspirations and calling the issue "a sacred matter" that must be addressed as part of a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Meanwhile, Netanyahu reacted skeptically but said that he'd start peace talks immediately if Abbas is "really serious."

Mr. President, you should not let this moment pass. Instead, you should remind the two leaders, and everyone else in the region, that peace-making requires risk-taking.

That means that Abbas needs to tell Palestinians that if they want the opportunity to build a thriving society of economic opportunity and political accountability, they will have to abandon their dream of replacing Israel with a Palestine that stretches from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Palestinian treks to the United Nations in search of "statehood" will not advance their cause.

That also means that, in cases like this, Netanyahu needs not to disparage Abbas but to praise him – and he also needs to remind Israelis that they, too, will have to make tough concessions, particularly on settlements.

Also, Mr. President, you should make clear to the leaders of Hamas that you, and the country you represent, are not blind to the hundreds of rockets that have traveled from Hamas-run Gaza to Israel in recent weeks – and that those attacks will only reinforce America's strong support for Israel. They will do nothing to legitimize Hamas in America's eyes or to advance the group's genocidal agenda.

You can also put the global spotlight, as only a U.S. President can, on what appears to be a "war on Christians" that's underway by radical Islamist forces across the greater Middle East and elsewhere.

Just in recent weeks, we have witnessed hundreds of deaths from violent attacks on churches in Egypt, Bahrain, Lebanon, Nigeria, Spain, and Indonesia; murders and assaults on Christians and on ex-Muslims who converted to Christianity in Somalia and Uzbekistan; forced conversions of hundreds of Christian children to Islam in Bangladesh; jailings of pastors in Iran – and all that and more in Pakistan.

For you, such a course would be controversial. It would challenge well-ingrained orthodoxies about how to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace and about whether to spotlight violence that's rooted in radical interpretations of religion.

But, Mr. President, if you have flexibility, you should use it to offer creative new approaches to longstanding conflicts and to better promote freedom and democracy in regions that have precious little of either.

Lawrence J. Haas was Communications Director and Press Secretary for Vice President Al Gore. He writes widely about foreign and domestic affairs and is the author of 'Sound the

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