

The Obama presidency: An assessment

Tommy Koh For The Straits Times
Published 17 September 2016

One unknown is whether his rebalancing to Asia will endure beyond his administration.

On Nov 8, the American people will elect their 45th president. Next January, four months from now, President Barack Obama will hand over the reins of power to his chosen successor. As the Obama presidency is rapidly coming to an end, I would like to do a preliminary assessment of his eight years in power.

My rendezvous with America began in 1963 when I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship and another scholarship by Harvard to study at Harvard Law School. Coming from multi-racial Singapore, I was shocked to find that America, especially in the south, was a racially segregated country. Dr Martin Luther King Jr delivered his famous speech, "I have a dream", when I was in America.

America only became racially desegregated after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. In the summer of 1964, I joined a Quaker-led programme, as a volunteer, and stayed in the predominantly black neighbourhood of Boston called Roxbury. I have seen first-hand the legacy of slavery and the enduring evil of racism in America.

I never expected to live long enough to see an African-American elected as the president of the United States. The election of Mr Barack Obama in 2008 and his re-election in 2012 seemed like a miracle to me. It is, however, clear from the vitriol which has been rained on him these past eight years, that there are many Americans who cannot accept a black man in the White House.

STATE OF THE UNION IN 2008



ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

Mr Obama was elected in November 2008. What was the state of the union at that time? The United States was faced with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The world watched with bated breath to see whether the new President would rescue the US economy and, by extension, the world economy, from another Great Depression. The US was embroiled in two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US' standing in the world was dismal.

ECONOMIC RECORD

The Obama administration's economic performance has been impressive. The world owes him a debt of gratitude for averting a second Great Depression. Consider the following facts. The US unemployment rate has gone down from 7.8 per cent in January 2009 to 4.9 per cent in June this year. Ten million jobs have been created in the last eight years. The US GDP has increased by 24 per cent during the same period. US exports to the world have increased by 43 per cent. The US economy has bounced back and is, once again, one of the most competitive economies in the world. The economy is, however, still not growing at its optimal rate.

DOMESTIC POLICY

Mr Obama's most important domestic achievement is the enactment of the Affordable Care Act, which has come to be known as Obamacare. The Republican Party has demonised Obamacare. The fact is, however, that 20 million Americans are covered by some form of health insurance and, for the first time in US history, nine in 10 Americans under 65 years old now have health insurance.

LAW AND ORDER

Mr Obama has made America, a country prone to gun violence, a safer place to live in. The rate of violent crime, which includes murder, homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault, has declined from 429 per 100,000 population in 2009, to 366 in 2014. However, because of the power of the gun lobby and the opposition from Congress, Mr Obama has failed to pass any significant legislation on gun reform.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

His energy policy has both an internal and an external dimension. Domestically, the US' dependence on imported oil has fallen by more than half during his tenure. In addition to an increase in the production of oil and gas, electricity generated by large-scale wind and solar power has increased by almost 300 per cent since 2008.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Externally, Mr Obama has played a leadership role in the successful negotiations leading to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. He succeeded in converting China from an adversary to an ally in the fight against global warming and climate change. It is significant that, in Hangzhou, on the sidelines of the G-20 summit, Mr Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping were able to exchange their ratification of the Paris Agreement.

BRINGING THE TROOPS HOME

Mr Obama pledged to withdraw US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. There were over 180,000 American troops in these two countries when he took office. There are now about 4,000 troops left in Iraq and nearly 10,000 in Afghanistan. It is one thing to withdraw the troops, it is another

to consider the consequence of such withdrawal. For example, will the Taleban fight their way back to power once the troops from Nato and the US are gone? Does the US not have the responsibility to help Iraq deal with some of the consequences which ensued from the US invasion and the foolish decisions to dismantle the Iraqi army and the Ba'ath Party?

It would not be unfair to say that the Obama administration's policy in the Middle East is not a success story. The Arab Spring has turned into a nightmare. The civil war in Syria is destroying that country and millions of Syrians have been forced to flee their homes as refugees. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians is a very remote possibility. Mr Obama's failure to punish Syrian President Bashar al-Assad when he crossed the so-called "red line" and used chemical weapons against his own people will continue to haunt him even though the chemical weapons were removed from Syria through diplomacy.

PIVOT TO ASIA

The one area of the Obama administration's foreign policy which has been a success story and a game changer is the "pivot to Asia", or "rebalancing to Asia". As a strategic thinker and as the first Pacific president of the United States, Mr Obama knows that in the 21st century, power is moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He wants the US to remain the predominant power of the Asia Pacific. Towards this end, he has elevated the importance of this region in US economic, political, military and cultural policies.

The US has refreshed and strengthened its alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia. It has been welcomed back to the Philippines. It has normalised its relations with Vietnam. It has forged a close relationship with India. Mr Obama is working to get Congressional approval of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement before the end of his administration.

He has brought about a paradigm shift in his country's relations with Asean. No US president before him has given to South-east Asia and to Asean the priority, attention and respect that he has. He signed the Asean Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. He is the first US president to have held an annual summit with Asean's 10 leaders since 2009. He has elevated the relationship between the US and Asean to the strategic level. He hosted a special summit with the leaders of Asean at Sunnylands, California. He has come personally to attend the annual Asean-US Summit and the East Asia Summit except in 2013, when he had to stay back to deal with the shutdown of the government caused by the Congress. He visited Myanmar twice to encourage that country's transition to democracy.

US-S'PORE TIES

Mr Obama and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong enjoy a close relationship. This was very much in evidence in August, when Mr Obama hosted an official visit by Mr and Mrs Lee and a rare state dinner at the White House.

US-CHINA TIES

China is the challenger to US leadership in the Asia Pacific. The relationship between the US and China is, however, fundamentally different from the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union. China is the largest creditor of the US and the US is China's largest export market. Their relationship is, therefore, both interdependent and competitive. The leaders of the two countries appear to have arrived at a modus vivendi: they will cooperate where their interests coincide, compete where they diverge and manage their disagreements and disputes with

maturity and rationality. We can safely say that under Presidents Obama and Xi, there will be no war, hot or cold, between the US and China.

I believe that history will judge Mr Obama kindly. History will record that he saved America and the world from a second Great Depression. He has restored the US economy. He has shown moral courage in negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran and normalising relations with Cuba. He has eliminated Osama bin Laden and other leaders of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. He has brought the US back to its historic role of upholding the rule of law. He is a champion of the earth. He has raised the standing of the US in the world. I hope his legacy of rebalancing to Asia will endure beyond his administration.

The writer served as Singapore's ambassador to the US from 1984 to 1990.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on September 17, 2016, with the headline 'The Obama presidency: An assessment'.