

## Obama's final UN meeting a report card on his foreign policy



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Carol E. Lee, The Wall Street Journal, 12:00AM September 20, 2016

US President Barack Obama makes his final appearance at the UN General Assembly this week, with the world looking far different from the one he envisioned taking shape under his leadership when he first addressed the annual gathering eight years ago.

From nuclear non-proliferation and Israeli-Palestinian peace to scaling back the US's war footing in the Middle East and engaging adversaries such as Iran and North Korea, the results of Obama's efforts since 2009 are mixed, foreign policy experts say.

He also arrives at the UN today with a new ceasefire agreement with Russia on Syria on the verge of collapse, heightened concerns about North Korea after its recent nuclear test and new potential acts of domestic terrorism in New York, New Jersey and Minnesota. "It's a much more dangerous world today than it was eight years ago," said Jim Jeffrey, a former US ambassador to Turkey and Iraq and deputy national security adviser to president George W. Bush.

Obama has had some success with the "four pillars" he described in his 2009 speech as "fundamental to the future that we want for our children". These were to stop the spread of nuclear weapons; reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal and combat terrorism; address climate change; and put the global economy on a more solid footing.

He achieved an international climate change agreement in Paris last December, and the global economy is faring better than when he came into office amid a widespread economic crisis. Obama also achieved a deal with Iran to curtail its nuclear program in exchange for

lifting economic sanctions. Still, the effort hasn't led to a broader thaw in relations, as the White House hoped, and North Korea's nuclear program has advanced over the past eight years. US efforts with Russia to reduce nuclear weapons stockpiles also stalled after some progress early in Obama's first term.

While Obama has brought home tens of thousands of US troops serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US now is fighting the rise of Islamic State and is engaged in more military fronts in the Middle East than at the start of his presidency — including in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Yemen.

Tensions between the Israelis and Palestinians have worsened, and relations between the US and Israel have been significantly strained during Obama's time in office — largely over his pursuit of the Iran nuclear deal.

During his first speech at the UN General Assembly, Obama outlined an ambitious effort to restart peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians, but a senior administration official said he doesn't plan to make a push on the issue this week.

Obama will meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday, the White House said, after the two governments recently reached a new deal on a \$US38 billion (\$50bn) package of US military aid to Israel over 10 years.

Obama, who addresses the General Assembly tomorrow, plans to take stock of the foreign policy agenda he first outlined in 2009 and encourage world leaders to advance the areas where his efforts have fallen short, his aides say. He will also point to the value of international institutions such as the UN in helping address global crises, pointing to the climate change agreement and agreeing on sanctions against Iran and North Korea. "When we went to the UN for the first time in 2009, the President focused on a number of critical priorities for the United States that were going to help define his presidency," says Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security adviser. "And coming back eight years later, we believe that we made significant progress in a number of these areas."

On the sidelines of the summit, Obama will try to prevent the unravelling of the Syria ceasefire and make progress on concerns about North Korea. Obama is expected to press for more aggressive action from Beijing to choke off Pyongyang's financial lifeline during an informal meeting overnight with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang.

One of the major disappointments for Obama this week is the US dynamic with Iran. Just three years ago, the White House had been angling for a meeting with Iranian President Hasan Rowhani during the General Assembly, an effort that resulted in a historic 15-minute phone call between the two leaders. Two years later, the US and five other world powers reached the nuclear agreement with Iran. White House officials had hoped the deal would be a gateway to restoring relations, saying Obama would be open to meeting with his Iranian counterpart, and even to visiting Tehran. But the Iranians have rebuffed US overtures, and this week Obama and Rowhani won't even be in New York for the General Assembly at the same time.

The dynamic underscores the limits of Obama's signature foreign policy achievement. "The President thinks the Iran deal is a huge deal because you took a country that seemed to be on the edge of acquiring a nuclear weapon and not only set it back a decade but bought time for the system to change before they can get a program up and running again," says Jon Alterman, a Middle East expert at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. "Was that a victory or was it a small delay at a huge cost? And the answer is we won't know for 10 years."

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