

Exit Dennis Ross, the Last of the Obama Foreign Policy “Czars”

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By Michael Crowley

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With his just-announced [departure](#) from the Obama White House next month, Dennis Ross will be the last of the “special envoys” installed by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in early 2009. Although Obama has enjoyed his share of important foreign policy successes—the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki, the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, Libya—his record on the issues his original team of envoys were chosen to address has been meager.

After some two years of shuttling around the Middle East, George Mitchell left the State Department with the Israelis and Palestinians having made no real progress toward a peace deal. Before his unexpected death, Richard Holbrooke managed only incremental progress towards peace and stability in Afghanistan. Prior to assuming a broader Middle East portfolio, Dennis Ross was originally tasked with focusing on Iran’s nuclear program, which the IAEA’s latest [report](#) reveals to be marching along despite some setbacks. And as Josh Rogin [noted last month](#), less-visible envoys like Steven Bosworth (North Korea) and Scott Gration (Sudan) left their jobs after limited success.

In each case, the envoy in question has been replaced with someone of a lower [stature](#), and the “envoy” system itself seems to have been deprioritized within the administration, perhaps in part because Hillary Clinton has [mastered the job](#) of top diplomat. Still, most of the above problems threaten to get worse before they get better—Iran in particular—although the recent quietude of North Korea after a [scary period](#) last fall and the absence of all-out war in Sudan after the secession of its southern half represent two very large dogs which thankfully have not barked. And as the U.S. heads into a close election, the uncertainty of Obama’s own political fate could begin to play a role in his foreign policy, freezing in place foreign actors waiting to see who will lead the U.S. after 2013 before they strike any new deals.

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