



Commentary

Assessing Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy¹

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Abstract

The beginning of the Obama administration back in 2008 started with great hopes and expectations for pivotal changes in the country's foreign and domestic politics. At the same time an important shift in the international distribution of power was taking place. The rise of China was fundamentally changing the political landscape and was imposing, for the first time after the end of the cold war, limitations to the American leadership. In addition to that, the US was experiencing a severe economic crisis, while it was also trapped in bloody and costly confrontations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington was giving the impression that it had reached a serious deadlock in its foreign policy. At this time of need, the first elected African American president was promising to the American people, who were tired of the constant confrontations and the economic uncertainties, not only the boost of the economy, but also that he would wind down the deeply unpopular war in Iraq and restore the country's wounded prestige in the international scene. The political puzzle was highly demanding and it definitely required a well-planned and structured grand strategy. Now that Obama's presidency is reaching its end, a holistic assessment of his term in office can demonstrate at what extent his foreign policy doctrine was successful.

The Obama Foreign Policy Doctrine

Many analysts and critics of Obama's foreign policy have accused the government of not having a clear and structured grand strategy doctrine in order to tackle the challenges that the US was facing, while at the same time, his administration was mainly responding to the events rather than pursuing an overarching strategy. This perception was further strengthened from the fact that Obama's main priority in the beginning of his first presidential term was to tackle the key economic problems that US was facing due to the outbreak of the financial crisis few months earlier. For the new president, a prosperous economy and a more dynamic foreign policy are the two sides of the same coin. An enhanced economic capacity could secure that the American foreign policy would remain active and

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efficient. Towards this direction the American president was also aiming to make the hegemonic position of his country sustainable with a smaller cost. In order to achieve this, Obama tried to limit his country's strategic overextension by ending the unpopular and costly wars of his predecessor in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this new era, the US government was willing to utilize mostly diplomatic tools in order to reduce the reliance on militarism. A vital component of this new strategy was the effort of improving relations with some longstanding adversaries in order to make progress in the realms of climate, human rights and trade while convincing its long-term allies to share the burden of sustaining the mutually benefiting liberal international order (Harris, 2016).

However, this specific tactic was viewed by most of the president's political opponents in Washington as a sign of weakness, or as a clear mark that the new administration was willing to give in to more pacifist ideas that would endanger the US in the international scene. This new weaker approach was lacking according to the republicans of a clear articulation of national interests married to a set of operational plans for advancing them. According to the same critics, although the utility of a soft power is always a useful component of a country's foreign policy, an overreliance to such methods and paths of action could make the American Grand strategy one-sided. Furthermore, the Obama administration lacked a well defined grand strategy doctrine that could offer an interpretative framework for foreign policy officials to follow and to implement more accurately (Harris, 2016).

The previous assumptions are more than farfetched; the reality is that, even if Obama's foreign policy doctrine had as a priority the use of diplomatic tools in order to advance the country's interests, it does not mean that other more 'dynamic' political initiatives were excluded from the government's toolbox. On the contrary, the Obama foreign policy doctrine, apart from the retrenchment element, had also the supplementary aspect of counterpunching (Nunlist, 2016).

Retrenchment Strategy

The first element of Obama's strategy was multilateral retrenchment. The Obama administration tried to initiate this element of its new foreign policy by restarting the country's relations with its long-time European allies, which had been severely damage during the Bush era. The new president's first priority was to leave behind the unilateral policy of his predecessor and to bring the transatlantic partners in the heart of the decision making process. Europeans were encouraged by Obama to acquire more responsibilities, especially in the security domain, in order to help the US focus its resources into other areas.

In East Asia, the improvement of the bilateral relations with China was Obama's prime foreign policy goal. Both Washington and Beijing engaged

in serious talks in order to begin, a U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. Moreover, President Obama was ready to discuss with his Chinese counterpart in good faith all the security and economic issues on which the interpretations of both countries clashed. Obama was supporting the continuation of the dialogue between Taiwan and Beijing for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and at the same time he was showing his understanding for the role that China was willing to play in the international scene. Washington was ready to accept a more influential Beijing under the condition that the latter would respect the international liberal order (Drezner, 2011).

Furthermore, the Obama administration was also determined to give more space to the emerging economic power and thus embraced the G-20 to supplant the G-8 as the premier international economic forum, in the belief that more partners would mean more effective partnerships. Countries such as Brazil, South Africa India, Indonesia, etc, were considered by Barack Obama as future partners and allies that would be willing to accept and support the international order, if they were allowed to play a role according to their increased capabilities and aspirations, (O'Hanlon, 2015).

In his effort to bring a new positive atmosphere in international relations, the American President was also willing to resume the strategic dialogue with Moscow, which was terminated with the war in Georgia in 2008. This gradual rapprochement between Washington and Moscow was violently terminated with the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014.

Regarding the US policy in the Middle East, the change in the US course of action was more than evident. President Obama distanced himself from the interventionist approach of his predecessor. He spoke of his willingness to restore the relations between the US and the Muslim world in general. At the same time he clarified that as long as he was president there would be no Iraqi style intervention. He even supported the beginning of negotiations with Iran for its nuclear program, an outcome unthinkable during the Bush era. Obama was promoting a different approach in the way that Washington was dealing with the Middle East. Rather than aggressively push for democracy, a more reserved United States would lead by example. (Nunlist, 2015) With the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, Obama's policy of strategic restraint and non-intervention came under severe pressure. Due to the cataclysmic events that followed in a series of countries in the region, Washington was dragged to implement a strategy that wanted to avoid from the beginning. To make matters worse, the political condition was also rapidly deteriorating after the mass demonstrations in Kiev and the overthrow of the Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich by the pro-Western opposition. This event triggered a violent reaction from Moscow, which led to the occupation of Crimea by Russian forces and ongoing violence in Eastern Ukraine.

At the same time even if in the beginning the Chinese and the American government seemed to reach a common understanding, China encouraged by the fact that it managed to escape the financial crisis untouched reacted to Obama's outstretched hand with bellicose rhetoric and grander regional aspirations. (Drezner, 2011).

To conclude, the strategy of restraint and burden sharing was certainly heading towards the right direction. The Obama administration, from the beginning understood that if the US was willing to sustain its hegemonic position in the international system it needed to urgently limit its commitments abroad. Unfortunately the retrenchment policy faced huge obstacles in its implementation. Due to the outbreak of various crises both in Europe and in the Middle East, the American President had to slow down the process of minimizing its commitments abroad. Hence, it is probably accurate to declare that such a policy has more potential if it takes place in times with no international tensions and crisis. Therefore, the Obama administration had to implement a supplementary policy that would address the new challenges that the US was facing without putting in danger the key element of Obama's foreign policy which was to limit his country's overextension.

Counterpunching strategy

The counterpunching strategy is the American response into a series international crisis that the US government had to face in the end of Obama's first presidency and onwards. Even if this aspect of Obama's foreign policy was not in the spotlight, it was also a key component of the country's strategy. (O'Hanlon, 2015).

The centerpiece of the counterpunching strategy was the so called pivot or rebalancing to Asia strategy. Obama administration decided to embrace this strategy when the carrot approach towards China failed to produce the expected results. Hence, by studying previous examples of rising powers challenging the status quo (Germany's rise in Europe after World War I; Athens and Sparta; the rise of the United States in the 20th century) the US officials developed a belief that China would respond best to a position of strength. (Wan, 2016) To find that leverage, the United States planned to forge stronger ties with its traditional allies in Asia and pick up new allies among neighbours alienated by China's new aggression — including Vietnam, Burma and India. Using that multilateral approach, the thinking went; the United States could offset China's rising military power and assertiveness. The implementation of this ambitious strategic plan was going to unfold in two parts. (Wan, 2016)

The military scale included a plan for the U.S. Navy to devote 60 percent of its fleet to the broader region by 2020, rather than the historic norm of 50

percent (O’Hanlon, 2015). Nevertheless, that is 60 percent of what is now a smaller Navy than before. So the overall net increase in capacity for the region is quite modest (indeed, some of those ships may wind up deployed in the Persian Gulf rather than the Asia-Pacific). The economic element of the pivot to Asia was the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal (TPP) that was signed on the 9th of February 2016. The signing of the agreement was one of the key goals that the American government and the president wanted to achieve since 2008. TPP substantially strengthens the trade and economic relationship of Washington with 12 countries and aims to formulate new trade rules that are compatible with vital American interests in the region, as Secretary of State John Kerry put it after the signing of the agreement. “We know that, with TPP, we will be far better positioned to protect our interests in the globe’s most dynamic region than we would be without it,” Kerry said. “Future prosperity and security will also rest on America’s role as a Pacific power,” (Washington Post, 2016). It is very important to add that although the pivot to Asia was a policy initiative that secured the support of the opposition, its credibility in the region is endangered due to the fact that the American congress is not willing to ratify the TPP agreement before the outcome of the November Presidential elections. This American reluctance has opened the needed window of opportunity for China to intensify its efforts in order to build its regional credentials and to take important countries of the region on Beijing’s side (Jennings, 2016). Furthermore, we should not forget that the success of the Pivot to Asia is heavily dependent on the fact that Washington had to limit its strategic overextension and presence in regions such as Europe and Middle East in order to devote its resources in Asia.

Unfortunately the deterioration of the strategic conditions in both areas creates important obstacles in materializing the pivot to Asia in the best possible way. Specifically in Europe, the tensions with Russia over Ukraine postponed any future plans for major retrenchment of American troops from the continent. Obama tried to limit his exposure in the management of the crisis by encouraging the Europeans to lead the negotiations with Russia, while at the same time Washington fully supported the economic sanctions imposed to Russia in order to deter further military aggression in the region (O’Hanlon, 2015).

In the case of the Middle East, US had no viable exit strategy. The outbreak of a series of violent demonstrations in Tunis in 2010-2011 and the collapse of the authoritarian and corrupted regime of President Ben Ali, created a domino-effect in almost all the Arab countries. At first, Obama viewed favorably the demonstrations since people were fighting in the streets for freedom and democracy, values that US was embracing and promoting internationally. Therefore the American government participated in the intervention in Libya in 2011 which led to the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, while he also actively supported both politically and, until the end

of 2013, with military aid, the anti-government forces in Syria. Unfortunately, the escalation of the civil conflicts in the Arab countries was the stepping stone for radical and extremist ideologists to gain great influence while the rapid withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq in 2011 created the necessary security vacuum that helped the terrorist groups to establish their presence mainly in Iraq and later also into Syria. Under this deteriorating situation, Obama's administrations tried to react in a way that was compatible with the strategic priority of avoiding costly confrontations in areas with declining strategic importance for the country. Thus the US government promoted an antiterrorist strategy that would encourage the use of surrogate forces in order to secure strategic and operational objectives in the region. The externalization of the burden of warfare has thereby been justified by the maxim of letting local partners solve local problems. This strategy took different shapes and forms, ranging from indirect to direct support of various states or non state actors. (Haas, 2013). The cases of using Iranian operatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps under General Soleimani together with Iraqi Shia militias, Kurdish peshmerga and YPG fighters as the necessary ground complement to US-led air strikes against ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria in 2014-2015 are characteristic examples of this new US antiterrorism doctrine. (Krieg, 2016 p.104) Further to the Obama administration made extensive use of drone strikes and other covert operations against high-valued strategic targets in order to manage this new security threat. Even if Obama's anti-terrorism approach in the Middle East was more flexible and less costly than his predecessor's, it did not manage to limit the US 'exposure' into conflict in the Middle East; Barack Obama found himself in a political condition which he wanted to avoid from the beginning of his Presidential term.

Final Assessment

The most accurate way to describe Obama's foreign policy is that of a mixed bag of successes and failures. Even if the American president accurately identified the fundamental problems of his country's foreign policy and in principle was willing to offer the right answers, he unfortunately faced great difficulty in the implementation of these policies. On the one hand, his foreign policy has been marked by awareness that the US has less and less resources at its disposal for dealing with increasingly complex challenges. Therefore, the president narrowed down the country's strategic interests and focused on especially urgent foreign policy problems. In order to achieve his goals he preferred to use as tools the political engagement and negotiations, multilateralism, burden-sharing, and collective responses to global problems and challenges. Furthermore, he announced the US pivot to Asia; a strategic planning with huge importance for the future. From the beginning he understood that the tendency of the international system is to

move towards a structure in which US and China will form the two main poles of the system. In order to secure better conditions for his country, he supported that Washington had to move its attention towards Asia in order to create the necessary conditions that would allow US to contain the growing Chinese influence in the regions. It is without any doubt that the pivot to Asia strategic planning is going to have a long-lasting effect on American strategic thought and due to the fact that it concentrates bipartisan support it will be an important component of his successor's foreign policy. On the other hand though, Obama's strategy of restraint has often been mistakenly applied. He without doubt left Iraq too soon, ignored the requirements of stabilizing post-Gaddafi Libya, and encouraged the overthrow of Assad in Syria but then unwisely placed his hopes almost exclusively in the Arab Spring and a Geneva-based peace process to achieve the task. He also failed to come up with any big, bold diplomatic ideas that might have helped solve a major crisis—such as a new security architecture for Europe that might help point a path toward an ultimate resolution of the Ukraine crisis, or a vision for a confederal Syria that might be more realistic than the current U.S. approach of insisting that Assad must leave power at all costs without having a viable alternative to propose. Finally, Obama's promise to get all operational U.S. military units out of Afghanistan before he leaves the White House puts his own pursuit of a historical legacy ahead of the nation's security needs.

To conclude, it is rare both in American and World History to find presidencies and administrations that can go down in history as periods of great innovation on foreign policy. International relations are very complex and volatile and thus difficult to adjust and manage. Therefore, the only way for policymakers and politicians to acquire the necessary intuition in order to deal with the complex nature of international politics, is via the detailed comprehension of their predecessors' foreign policy failures and achievements. Thus, in order to achieve its main goals, the next American government must learn from Obama's mistakes while continuing his successful political initiatives.

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