



ORAN 2 University  
Faculty of Foreign Languages  
Department of English

## **Obama's Foreign Policy and the Middle East: from Involvement to Retrenchment**

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of *Doctorat Es-Sciences* in American Civilization

Submitted by: Messeded Moustafa

### Board of Examiners:

|  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| President: Prof. Benhattab Abdelkader    | University of Oran 2     |
| Supervisor: Prof. Yacine Rachida         | University of Oran 2     |
| Co-supervisor: Dr. Jamie Allinson        | University of Edinburgh  |
| Examiner: Dr. Hamane Soraya              | University of Oran 2     |
| Examiner: Prof. Larbi Youcef Abdeldjalil | University of Mostaganem |
| Examiner: Prof. Afkir Mohamed            | University of Laghouat   |

2020-2021

## **Dedication**

To everyone who helped in my education and contributed to my career development.

## **Acknowledgment**

The completion of this work would not have been possible without the help and contribution of many in the academia and beyond. My special thanks go to my supervisor Pr. Yacine Rachida for her continued support and valuable feedback. I would like also to thank Dr. Jamie Allinson for accepting my supervision during my twelve-month research visit at the University of Edinburgh and for his invaluable insights. My thanks are also due to Dr. Muhammed Idrees Ahmed of the University of Stirling, Dr. Nicholas Kitchen of the University of Surrey, Dr. Andrew Hom and Dr. Oliver Turner of the University of Edinburgh for accepting to be interviewed and for their informative commentaries. My thanks also go to all my PhD colleagues for sharing their thoughts on this work and for their advice on how to travel the challenging route of the research journey.

I am deeply grateful for the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research for the research grant which made my twelve-month research visit to the University of Edinburgh possible. The efforts made by the administrative staff of Oran 2 University and Blida 2 University to complete the paperwork of this research visit is much appreciated. I am also thankful for the staff of the Visiting Student Office at the University of Edinburgh for their help and dedication. The support of the graduate office of the School of Social and Political Science, especially of Elaine Khennouf of the admissions office, was above standards and beyond expectations.

The support of people outside the academic is no less significant. My parents and my close relatives continue to be a source of inspiration and encouragement. Their longing for my academic accomplishments has time and again revitalized my motivation, especially at times of adversity. The Arab community of the city of Edinburgh was a second family and a continuous source of support. I am especially thankful to my Algerian and Tunisian friends in the city of Edinburgh, especially Dr. Imed Romdhani of Napier University, for their support and encouragement.

## **Abstract**

Obama's foreign policy choices have generated contentious debates on the direction of American foreign policy. Critics have assessed such choices either in isolation or as revealing of the essence of Obama's foreign policy regardless of the variation in policy from region to another. In this regard, this study aims first to examine the president's policy choices in the Middle East across a number of cases and to determine whether such choices are revealing of any unifying and guiding strategy. It then attempts to examine the possible determinants that influenced the trajectory of Obama's Middle East policy from a neoclassical realist perspective. The thesis makes the case that the combination of Obama's policy in Iraq, his response to the Syrian conflict, his approach to Iran, and his response to ISIS is revealing of retrenchment as the overarching strategy that informed such policy choices. Such strategy, however, does not signal a radical departure from the grand strategy of primacy that has long defined the direction of American foreign policy. Retrenchment functions as a strategy within a strategy and aims to balance the ends and means of conducting foreign policy. The study further argues that neither international nor domestic explanations can account for Obama's Middle East policy choices in isolation and that an interaction between the two levels of analysis is possible. Such interaction provides both rigor and parsimony in explaining the direction of Obama's Middle East policy. America's relative decline after two costly wars and a financial crisis coupled with the rise of rival powers not only put limits on what the Obama administration could do abroad but also triggered an 'internal balancing' act to balance foreign policy objectives and priorities. Such reality also made the investment in reviving the domestic foundations of American leadership abroad a necessity. Meanwhile, the changing nature of the regional dynamics of the Middle East, characterized by a fierce competition between regional powers to shape events and the rise of non-state actors with conflicting interests and ideologies, further complicated American foreign policy calculus and limited the choices of the Obama administration. In this regard, Obama's perceptions of American power, the Middle East and its dynamics, and America's role in the region is no less significant in determining the direction of Obama's Middle East policy.

## **Résumé**

Les choix de politique étrangère d'Obama ont suscité des débats controversés sur l'orientation de la politique étrangère américaine. Les critiques ont évalué ces choix soit isolément, soit comme révélateurs de l'essence de la politique étrangère d'Obama, indépendamment de la variation de la politique d'une région à l'autre. À cet égard, cette étude vise à examiner les choix politiques du président au Moyen-Orient à travers un certain nombre de cas et à déterminer si ces choix révèlent une stratégie unificatrice et directrice. Elle tente ensuite d'examiner les déterminants possibles qui ont influencé la trajectoire de la politique d'Obama au Moyen-Orient d'un point de vue réaliste néoclassique. La thèse montre que la combinaison de la politique d'Obama en Irak, de sa réponse au conflit syrien, de son approche de l'Iran et de sa réponse à L'Etat Islamique en Iraq et en Syrie est révélatrice de la réduction des effectifs tant que stratégie globale qui a éclairé ces choix politiques. Une telle stratégie, cependant, ne signale pas un facteur révélateur de la grande stratégie de primauté qui a long temps défini l'orientation de la politique étrangère américaine. Le retrait fonctionne comme une stratégie au sein d'une stratégie et vise à équilibrer les fins et les moyens de la conduite de la politique étrangère. L'étude soutient en outre que ni les explications internationales ni nationales ne peuvent rendre compte des choix politiques d'Obama de manière isolée et qu'une interaction entre les deux niveaux d'analyse est possible. Une telle interaction fournit à la fois rigueur et parcimonie pour expliquer l'orientation de la politique d'Obama au Moyen-Orient. Le déclin relatif de l'Amérique après deux guerres coûteuses et une crise financière, couplé à la montée en puissance de puissances rivales, a non seulement limité ce que l'administration Obama pouvait faire à l'étranger, mais a également déclenché un «équilibre interne» pour équilibrer les objectifs et les priorités de la politique étrangère. Une telle réalité a également rendu nécessaire l'investissement dans la relance des fondements nationaux du leadership américain à l'étranger. Pendant ce temps, la nature changeante de la dynamique régionale du Moyen-Orient, caractérisée par une concurrence féroce entre les puissances régionales pour façonner les événements et la montée en puissance d'acteurs non étatiques aux intérêts et idéologies contradictoires, a encore compliqué le calcul de la politique étrangère américaine et limité les choix de l'administration d'Obama. À cet égard, les perceptions d'Obama de la puissance américaine, du Moyen-Orient et de sa dynamique, ainsi que du rôle de l'Amérique dans la région ne sont pas moins importantes pour déterminer l'orientation politique d'Obama au Moyen Orient.

## ملخص

أدت خيارات السياسة الخارجية لأوباما إلى مناقشات مثيرة للجدل حول توجهات السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية. وقام النقاد بتقييم مثل هذه الخيارات إما بمعزل عن غيرها أو على أنها تكشف عن جوهر سياسة أوباما الخارجية بغض النظر عن الاختلاف في السياسة من منطقة إلى أخرى. في هذا الصدد، تهدف هذه الدراسة لاستقراء خيارات سياسة الرئيس في الشرق الأوسط عبر عدد من الحالات وتحديد ما إذا كانت هذه الخيارات تكشف عن أي استراتيجية موحدة وتوجيهية. كما تهدف الدراسة إلى محاولة فحص المحددات المحتملة التي أثرت على مسار سياسة أوباما في الشرق الأوسط من منظور الواقعية الكلاسيكية الجديدة. وتخلص الأطروحة أن سياسة أوباما في العراق ، وقراراته فيما يخص الصراع السوري ، وتوجهه تجاه إيران ، وردة على داعش ، تكشف عن سياسة تخفيض النفقات باعتبارها الاستراتيجية الشاملة التي أدت إلى هذه الخيارات السياسية. ومع ذلك ، لا تشير مثل هذه الاستراتيجية إلى التخلي عن الاستراتيجية الكبرى المتمثلة في الهيمنة الليبرالية التي ميّزت منذ فترة طويلة السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية. ويمثل تخفيض النفقات استراتيجية ضمن استراتيجية، وتهدف إلى تحقيق التوازن بين الغايات ووسائل إدارة السياسة الخارجية. كما تخلص الدراسة إلى أنه لا يمكن للتفسيرات الدولية أو المحلية تفسير خيارات سياسة أوباما بمعزل عن غيرها وأن التفاعل بين مستويي التحليل ممكن. إن الانحدار النسبي لأمريكا بعد حربين مكلفتين وأزمة مالية مصحوبة بصعود القوى المنافسة لم تضع قيوداً على ما يمكن أن تفعله إدارة أوباما في الخارج فحسب، بل أدت أيضاً إلى إتباع مقاربة "التوازن داخلي" لتحقيق التوازن بين أهداف السياسة الخارجية وأولوياتها. وجعل مثل هذا الواقع الاستثمار في إحياء الأسس المحلية للقيادة الأمريكية في الخارج ضرورة. وفي الوقت نفسه، فإن الطبيعة المتغيرة للديناميكيات الإقليمية في الشرق الأوسط والتي تتميز بمنافسة شرسة بين القوى الإقليمية للتأثير على الأحداث وصعود جهات فاعلة غير حكومية ذات مصالح وإيديولوجيات متضاربة، زادت من تعقيد حسابات السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية وقيدت خيارات البيت الأبيض برئاسة أوباما. وفي هذا الصدد، لا تقل تصورات أوباما أهمية عن القوة الأمريكية والشرق الأوسط ودينامياته ودور أمريكا في المنطقة في تحديد اتجاه سياسة أوباما تجاه الشرق الأوسط.

## **List of Abbreviations**

ARAMCO: Arabian American Standard Oil Company

AUMF: Authorization for Use of Military Force

BCA: Budget Control Act

CASOC: California Arabian Standard Oil Company

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

CRS: Congressional Research Service

CSIS: Center of Strategic and International Studies

FPE: Foreign Policy Executive

FY: Fiscal Year

IPC: Iraq Petroleum Company

ISIS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PDP: Police Development Program

PNAC: Project for the New American Century

SOCAL: Standard Oil of California

SOCONY: Standard Oil Company of New York

UN: United Nations

UNSC: United Nations Security Council

USAID: US Agency for International Development

WPR: War Powers Resolution





|  |    |
|--|----|
| 2- The Middle East and the Taft Administration: The False Promise of Dollar Diplomacy.....       | 59 |
| 3- Wilson and the Belfour Declaration .....  | 62 |
| 4- Middle Eastern Oil, American Diplomacy and the National Interest .....                        | 64 |
| 4-1 Oil as the Strategic Asset of the New Century .....  | 65 |
| 4-2 The Turkish Petroleum Company .....  | 66 |
| 4-3 Bahrain and Kuwait .....   | 67 |
| 4-4 Saudi Arabia .....   | 69 |
| 5- Oil and the National Interest: A Growing Official and Corporate Partnership .....             | 72 |
| 6- The Middle East and the Policy of Containment: Contending with the Soviet Challenge.....      | 77 |
| 6-1 Truman and the Policy of Containment .....   | 77 |
| 6-2 Truman and the Support of Zionism: Between Domestic Politics and Cold War Calculations ..... | 78 |
| 6-3 The Baghdad Pact: Marshalling Pro-Western Forces .....                                       | 81 |
| 6-4 The Challenge of Arab Nationalism .....  | 82 |
| 7- The US and Israel: Consolidating a Strategic Alliance .....                                   | 86 |
| 8- The Gulf War: The Dawn of a Unipolar Moment .....   | 88 |
| 9- The Bush Doctrine: The “War on Terror” and Regime Change in Iraq .....                        | 92 |
| Conclusion .....   | 96 |

### **Chapter Three: Obama’s Middle East Policy: Retrenchment in Practice**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction .....  | 97  |
| 1- Beyond Troop Withdrawal: Downsizing the US Role in Iraq .....                | 99  |
| 1-2 Complete Troop Withdrawal .....   | 99  |
| 2-2 The US Mission Iraq: Scaling Back Staff and Operations .....                | 103 |
| 2-4 Foreign Aid in Decline .....  | 106 |
| 2- Syria: The Mismatch between Means and Ends .....                             | 107 |
| 2-1 The Limits of Non-Military Alternatives .....                               | 108 |
| 2-2 The Dismal Prospects of Military Options .....                              | 111 |
| 2-5 The False Promise of the “Red Line” .....                                   | 115 |
| 3- Airstrikes, Drones and Surrogate War: Low-Cost Courses of Intervention ..... | 121 |
| 3-1 The Syrian Opposition: Support by Proxies .....                             | 122 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 3-2 A Burden-sharing Approach to the War on ISIS.....               | 125 |
| 3-3 Local Forces in the Frontlines .....                            | 126 |
| 3-4 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV): A Less Costly Alternative ..... | 130 |
| 4- Accommodating Tehran .....                                       | 136 |
| 4-1 An Opening for Engagement .....                                 | 138 |
| 4-2 A Multilateral Diplomacyand the Nuclear Deal .....              | 142 |
| Conclusion .....  | 148 |

## **Chapter Four: International Explanations of Obama’s Middle East Policy**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction .....  | 149 |
| 1- Relative Decline, Foreign Policy Change and Retrenchment.....                  | 151 |
| 1-1 American Relative Decline: The Present Debate .....                           | 151 |
| 1-2 America’s Relative Decline in the Obama Years: A Fresh Assessment .....       | 155 |
| 1-3 Relative Decline, Strategic Prioritizing and Retrenchment .....               | 161 |
| 1-3-1 Stronger at Home, Competitive Abroad: ‘Internal Balancing’ Revisited .....  | 161 |
| 1-3-2 Reprioritizing National Interests and Objectives in the Middle East .....   | 167 |
| 1-3-3 Rebalancing to Asia: A Response to Structural Change .....                  | 174 |
| 2- The Regional Environment’s Turn in Obama’s Middle East Policy .....            | 180 |
| 2-1 An International Environment Fraught with Complexities .....                  | 181 |
| 2-2 The Middle East and the Challenge of “Multiplexity” .....                     | 184 |
| 2-2-1 Regional Powers’ Balancing Acts in the Middle East: The Case of Syria ..... | 186 |
| 2-2-1-1The Sino-Russian Holdout against American Interventionism .....            | 186 |
| 2-2-1-2 Russo-Iranian Involvement: Complicating American Calculus.....            | 190 |
| 2-2-2 Non-state Actors and the Complexity of the Operational Environment .....    | 194 |
| Conclusion .....  | 202 |

## **Chapter Five: Obama’s Perceptions and the Making of Middle East Policy**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Introduction .....   | 204 |
| 1- Presidential Preeminence in the Making of American Foreign Policy ..... | 206 |
| 2- President Obama and the Dominance of Middle East Policy Making .....    | 215 |
| 2-1 The Obama White House and Micromanagement .....                        | 215 |
| 2-2 State of Emergency, Counterterrorism and War Powers .....              | 219 |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| 2-3 Presidential Unilateralism through Executive Actions .....                                       | 223        |
| 3- Congress: A Limited Role and a Lax Oversight .....  | 226        |
| 3-1 Executive Agreements and Limited Wars .....  | 226        |
| 3-2 The Limits of the War Powers Resolution .....  | 232        |
| 4- Obama’s Perceptions, Foreign Policy Implications and Retrenchment .....                           | 237        |
| 4-1 Obama’s Perception of American Power .....   | 237        |
| 4-1-1 The Limits of Military Power in the Un-American Century .....                                  | 239        |
| 4-1-2 The Domestic Sources of America’s Global Leadership .....                                      | 244        |
| 4-2 Obama’s Perception of the Middle East: Ideology as a Driving Force of Local<br>Dynamics.....     | 247        |
| 4-2-1 Sectarianism: The Constant Variable in Regional Dynamics .....                                 | 248        |
| 4-2-2 Changing Perceptions of Allies and Adversaries .....   | 251        |
| 4-2-2-1 Iran: The “Powerful Country” with a “Worldview” .....  | 251        |
| 4-2-2-2 America’s “so-called Allies” in the Gulf.....  | 255        |
| 4-3 Obama’s Perception of America’s Role in the Middle East .....                                    | 257        |
| 4-3-1 Obama the Hardheaded Realist: The “Indispensable” power with Limited<br>Responsibilities ..... | 258        |
| 4-3-2 Obama the Visionary Idealist: The “Exceptional” Power that Leads by<br>Example .....           | 261        |
| Conclusion .....   | 266        |
| <b>General Conclusion .....</b>  | <b>267</b> |
| <b>References .....</b>  | <b>273</b> |

## General Introduction

“...when you hear the Republicans talk about well, you know, we'd go in and fix this right away. We're going to win in Middle East. What's clear is that you don't have any sense of how difficult it is. And they don't have a lot of sense of history, including the recent history of our efforts in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.”<sup>1</sup>

President Obama in an interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC News, December 12, 2015.

Such was President Obama's response to those who accused him of making the United States weaker on the world's stage, and of his inability to shape events in the Middle East. This response is revealing of two main premises about Obama's Middle East policy; that the first African American president was different from his predecessor who advanced a transformational agenda in the region through the unilateral use of force and that America's last two wars and their ramifications were the reference point that informed Obama's thinking about America's role in the Middle East. While these conclusions are not inaccurate, they are very simplistic and miss the big picture about the direction of American foreign policy in the Middle East during the Obama presidency.

Critics have advanced a number of interpretations on the essence of Obama's foreign policy, with most of them setting the foreign policy of the previous administration and the promises of change made by Obama the presidential candidate as their main reference points. Putting American foreign policy in historical context, Stephen Sestanovich suggests that almost every president has come with an agenda that sets him apart from his predecessor and no president has ever campaigned on a distinct set of policies like Barack Obama. In this regard, President Obama came with a minimalist foreign policy agenda that centers on two objectives: to scale back the country's international commitments and to improve America's reputation and legitimacy through gestures of good will.<sup>2</sup>

For the same purpose of distinguishing his presidency from that of his predecessor, Obama was determined to be the non-ideological president whose foreign policy should be guided by realism rather than the promotion of American ideals and values.<sup>3</sup> Although Obama's foreign policy strategy was still in flux by the end of his first term, argues Ryan Lizza, there had been

---

<sup>1</sup>George Stephanopoulos, “Full Interview Transcript: President Barack Obama,” ABC News, September 15, 2015, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/full-interview-transcript-president-barack-obama/story?id=35203825>

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Sestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 2014)

<sup>3</sup>Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama Foreign Policy,” *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>

a unifying principle of Obama's foreign policy choices which is the need for the United States "to act humbly in the world," especially in the backdrop of the anti-American sentiment after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If there was ever an Obama doctrine, argues Lizza, it is the idea of America "leading from behind" in military operations like in Libya rather than assuming a leading role that would breed another wave of opposition and resentment.<sup>4</sup>

Even before the end of Obama's second term, Robert Singh contends that the President's foreign policy approach centers on the acceptance of a "post-American" international system in which American power is clearly on the wane, with the president working to manage such decline rather than to reverse it. Based on such premise, the president adopted a "pragmatic, prudent and at time accommodationist" approach to deal with international affairs, much like Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon did before him. With the United States operating in an interconnected and interdependent world, the Obama presidency did not see isolationism as an option, but embraced a strategy of "engagement" which sought to extend a hand to adversaries and to rely on international cooperation to solve global problems.<sup>5</sup>

Colin Dueck concurs with Singh on the centrality of engagement in Obama's foreign policy calculus, but he argues that engagement is only one element of a hybrid strategy that also includes containment, assertion, integration and sometimes regime change. The umbral concept of this hybrid approach, argues Dueck, is an "overarching retrenchment and accommodation" on the world's stage. Accounting for such direction in American foreign policy under Obama is pretty obvious; the president came with an ambitious progressive agenda at the domestic level which relegated foreign policy in the hierarchy of priorities. Such agenda is driven first and foremost by domestic politics to marshal public support and win reelection.<sup>6</sup>The main argument of Dueck is that President Obama did not follow a well-defined and preplanned strategy, and that his foreign policy choices can be explained entirely by domestic factors, chief among them is the aspiration for reelection.

Much like Dueck, Daniel Drezner contends that President Obama followed two main strategies, namely retrenchment and counterpunching. The former was adopted in the first

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup>Robert Singh, *Barack Obama's Post American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012): 6-7

<sup>6</sup>Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp 2-3

year and a half of his presidency, and though it was clearly articulated, it had been counterproductive. With America's declining power, a rising China and an increasingly assertive Russia, the Obama administration pursued a more accommodating relationship with its traditional rivals in the hope of enlisting them to solve global challenges. Such stance, argues Drezner, made America appear weaker and in turn emboldened rather than comforted its adversaries. In consequence, the Obama White House adopted a more assertive, and at times aggressive, posture to promote American interests and respond to challenges. Such approach was more rewarding as it comforted American allies of its commitment and continued global leadership.<sup>7</sup>

Such aggressive posture went against the expectations of Obama's supporters and even some in his inner circle in the White House. President Obama did not turn to be the pacifist president he was expected to be, or the president who would break entirely with the unilateral and aggressive practices of the past administration. His rhetoric about engaging adversaries and extending a hand to them turned to be, as David Sanger suggests, "just a tactic, not a real strategy." While he did not forsake the use of force, even unilaterally when American security is directly threatened, he would often rely on instruments that are economical, precise, discreet and less contentious. According to Sanger, Obama surprised even his supporters with the marked escalation of the use of drones and covert operations like cyber wars.<sup>8</sup> It is Obama's secret wars, especially through drones, which constitute the central element of the Obama doctrine, argues David Rohde.<sup>9</sup> With the classified nature of drone operations and the increasing power of the CIA to employ them, the Obama administration did little to break with the unilateral practices of the previous administration. Perhaps the only departure from the Bush presidency is the focus of the fight against el Qaida instead of the expansive "war on terror"<sup>10</sup>

To some critics, Obama foreign policy is nothing but a Bush Doctrine in disguise. While Obama promised to depart from his predecessor's imperialist and aggressive practice to expand and protect the international liberal order, Obama pursued the same trajectory by

---

<sup>7</sup>Daniel W. Drezner, "Does Obama have a Grand Strategy: Why we Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times," *Foreign Affairs* 90, n. 4 (July/August 2011)

<sup>8</sup> David, E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, (USA: Crown Publishers, 2012), P xv

<sup>9</sup>David Rohde, "The Obama Doctrine," *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/the-obama-doctrine/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

“appealing to moral-sounding principles”.<sup>11</sup> President Obama and his entourage continued and expanded the national security state, intensified the use of counterinsurgency and surveillance techniques, and escalated the use of drones to kill even US citizens without due process of law.<sup>12</sup>

While these critiques offer informative insights on the essence and direction of American foreign policy under Obama, they still lack both rigor and parsimony, especially when considered in isolation. The limitations of these assessments stem from regarding Obama’s approaches to foreign policy as mutually exclusive. Judging Obama’s foreign policy choices from a single or limited number of cases and within a limited span of time would not do his foreign policy legacy justice. What is needed therefore is a close examination of the possible connections between Obama’s foreign policy choices throughout his presidency. As for the possible determinants of these choices, the question is not either or, but the manner in which the various influences interacted to inform the long term trajectory of Obama’s foreign policy.

In conducting this research, the choice of the Middle East and the related case studies as a reference point to examine both the essence of Obama’s foreign policy and the influences that informed his choices is not arbitrary. The Middle East occupies a central place in the narratives and the calculus of American policy makers. What Americans consider core national interests, from the flow of cheap oil to the international market, the security of Israel, the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the security of trade routes vital to a free-market economy are closely connected to the Middle East and its dynamics. American presidents, both as candidates and occupants of the Oval Office, have long campaigned to promote American interests in the region to win elections, garner public support or to simply disparage their opponents. To this trend Barack Obama is no exception. He made the Iraq war and troop withdrawal the central theme of his first presidential campaign and employed what he considered his foreign policy accomplishments in the Middle East to campaign on continuing in office. What makes the region a more relevant case for the study of American foreign policy is what Obama described as the “enormous changes that took place post Arab Spring” which “don’t happen, you know, every ten years. They happen every 50, 60, 70 years.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>Robert Weiss, “Imperial Obama- a Kinder, Gentler Empire?” *Social Justice*, Vol. 37, No. 2/3 (2010-11), pp. 1-9.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid

<sup>13</sup>George Stephanopoulos



In this context, this study has two main objectives. The first is to examine the extent to which the choices of Obama's Middle East policy are revealing of an overarching strategy or what presidential scholars prefer to term a doctrine. If Obama seems to have pursued more than a strategy, what are the possible connections between them and how far are they contradictory or complementary. The second aim of the study is to examine the determinants of the direction of Obama's Middle East policy and the possible interactions between them. Such inquiry is of much significance given the diverse and quite conventional interpretations that have been offered to explain American foreign policy under Obama. The need to affect progressive reforms, the urgency to deal with the financial crisis, the dire ramifications of the last two wars, the role of Congress and public opinion are few among many arguments advanced to account for some of the consequential decisions taken by the Obama administration. To put it in a concise research question; what strategy, if any, did president Obama pursue in his Middle East policy and what are the determinants that account for his policy choices in the region?

The study advances a number of arguments about the essence of Obama's Middle East policy and the most defining forces that influenced the direction of his policy choices .

The study argues that while retrenchment continued to be the guiding principle of American Middle East policy during the Obama presidency, liberal hegemony or primacy was never abandoned as the overarching strategy which has guided American foreign policy throughout the Cold War and thereafter. Retrenchment was pursued as a strategy within a strategy and aimed essentially to strike a balance between ends and means. As such, retrenchment did not signal a radical departure from the expansive foreign policy agenda of the previous administration, but sought to promote core national interests with less cost and minimum risks. Accommodation is not a strategy pursued in its own right, as Dueck argues, but is an instrument to deal with rivals and adversaries. In the same regard, the occasional use of force through light-footprint instruments and military coalitions, or what Drezner dubs counterpunching, is an integral part of retrenchment, not a strategy in its own right, to signal assertiveness at times of military retreat.

Retrenchment, loosely defined as a strategy to scale back international commitments, avoid costly military ground operations, employ light-footprint and low-cost instruments to conduct military operations and shift the burdens and responsibilities to regional allies and partner

forces,<sup>14</sup> continued to define Obama's approach to the Middle East despite the rapidly changing dynamics of the region in the last decade. In this context, Obama's retrenchment was not a simple reaction to his predecessor's. Although troop withdrawal was negotiated and agreed on by the Bush administration, the option of leaving residual troops was still hanging in the balance. Going against the advice of the Pentagon and his close advisers, Obama flatly rejected the option of leaving a residual force in Iraq, especially absent a legal immunity from the Iraqi legal system. More importantly, the Obama White House embraced cuts in commitments they envisioned to replace the dwindling military presence. This include the termination of the Police Development program, the reduction in the US Iraq mission by more than 60 percent, the closure of many diplomatic and support facilities and the initiation of drastic cuts in civilian and military aid. The combination of such measures are revealing of Obama's approach to downsize the US role in Iraq.

As the conflict in Syria continued to escalate, calls for a bolder American response from Obama's inner circle, the republican opposition and America's allies in the region only intensified. President Obama, however, insisted to keep the Syrian conflict at arm's length, resisting not only direct military intervention, but also to provide lethal support to the Syrian opposition. Other military options ranging from targeted airstrikes on Syrian military facilities, the imposition of a no-fly zone or a buffer zone along the northern Syrian borders were all turned down as ways to militarize the conflict and as only the beginning of deeper military involvement without any end in sight. Even when the red line Obama drew against the use of chemical weapons was violated by the Syrian regime according to American assessments, the President turned to a divided Congress to seek an authorization to use force and eventually accepted a Russian-negotiated diplomatic formula which was suggested by the United States in the first place. President Obama was not simply loathe embarking on military commitments regarding the Syrian conflict, but was inherently a risk-averse commander in chief obsessed with what comes next.

President Obama never embraced isolationism, nor did he renounce the use of force to protect American interests. Counterterrorism in this respect remained a priority for the Obama administration, but the instruments deployed to conduct it are distinct from the expansive ground wars espoused by the Bush administration. In the campaign against the group known as ISIS, President Obama resorted to a number of alternatives to reduce costs and minimize

---

<sup>14</sup>Sestanovich, *Maximalist*, Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine*, Drezner, "Does Obama have a Grand Strategy"

risks. He first forged an international coalition of 60 countries, including key allies from the Middle East who contributed to the military operations with funding, logistics, military bases and with their own air forces. Unlike the war in Iraq and Afghanistan which involved ground troops from the US and its NATO allies, local forces and militias in Iraq and Syria assumed the bulk of the fighting with coalition forces tasked to provide training and intelligence. As less controversial and less costly alternatives to ground wars, the Pentagon relied heavily on airstrikes and drones to conduct military operations and to gather intelligence.

In the same context, accommodating Tehran seems the most viable option for the Obama administration to accomplish what it considered the most consequential objective in the region, to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. If Iran becomes nuclear, Obama contends, every other problem in the region would exacerbate. The security of Israel, America's closest ally in the region, would be jeopardized, a regional nuclear arms race would be instituted, Iran would likely escalate its activities to maximize its regional influence, and a nuclear deterrence would make any military response against Tehran counterproductive. The Obama White House resorted to both sticks and carrots to bring Iran to the negotiating table and to eventually arrive to the nuclear deal. While President Obama avoided confrontational discourse with the Iranian leadership on its response to the popular protests that contested the 2009 presidential election, he authorized cyber-attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities and intensified economic sanctions. In embracing the diplomatic track to deal with the Iranian nuclear program, Obama seemed to defy both America's regional allies and the Republican opposition at home.

Such direction of Obama's Middle East policy is revealing of a strategic adjustment but not a radical departure from the foreign policy course of the previous administration, and more importantly of retrenchment as the strategy of choice for the Obama administration. Domestic factors like the financial crisis, the influence of public opinion, the role of Congress, or the aspiration for reelection can explain some but not most of the choices made by President Obama regarding his Middle East policy. Public opinion much like Congress was more often than not supportive of the president. The latter did little to exercise its role of checking Presidential power in the realm of international affairs and President Obama showed no sign of giving up his prerogatives as a commander in chief. Although the Great Recession of 2008 did much to limit the President's foreign policy choices, the US economy showed signs of

improvement in the last quarter of 2009.<sup>15</sup> Even after his election for a second term, retrenchment continued to guide American foreign policy in the region.

The central argument this study advances is that neither domestic nor international determinants can account for Obama's strategic adjustment in the Middle East in isolation and that an interaction between the two levels of analysis provides both rigor and parsimony in explaining the direction of Obama's Middle East policy. A first cut analysis of a state's foreign policy should start by examining the role of the international system, namely the degree of the state's power and capabilities, on state behavior because it is "the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations"<sup>16</sup> and it therefore determines "the magnitude and ambition" or what Gedeon Rose terms "the envelope" of a country's foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> States, moreover, do not operate in a vacuum but in an international or regional environment that incentives foreign policy makers to act according to emerging threats and opportunities, which in turn expand or limit the range of the state's foreign policy choices<sup>18</sup> Despite the defining effect of state's power and the international environment, such effect is indirect because it is mediated by other unit-level variables within the state like leaders' perceptions, the strategic culture of the state and the role of its bureaucracy.<sup>19</sup>

From a realist perspective, America's place in the international system and the international environment influenced the direction of Obama's Middle East policy in intricate ways. America's relative decline during the Obama presidency, the consequence of the previous administration's fiscal policy along with two costly wars, triggered policy changes that impacted the trajectory of American foreign policy in two ways, one is conventional and the other is rather nuanced. The financial conditions of the country in Obama's early years in office induced spending cuts that limited the available resources for the conduct of an ambitious foreign policy. Such changes imposed limits on the range of foreign policy objectives the new administration was set to achieve, making the attendance to the national security of the country a core national interest while the promotion of a liberal and

---

<sup>15</sup> "Chart Book: The Legacy of the Great Recession," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/chart-book-the-legacy-of-the-great-recession>

<sup>16</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay," *International Security* 17, no. 1 (Summer, 1992): 197

<sup>17</sup> Gedeon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, n 1, (October 1998): 152

<sup>18</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, (UK: Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2016), 20, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.001.0001

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 30

ideological agenda internationally was relegated to a second place. A more subtle account of how relative decline induced foreign policy change is evident in the emphasis President Obama put on reviving the domestic sources of American power not simply to affect a progressive agenda at home, but to sustain and revive an ailing American leadership on the world's stage. Such objective precipitated an "internal balancing" act that sought to strengthen the elements of power in which the US is in deficit. Tradition internal balancing usually involves military buildup, but in the American case it meant the investment in the elements of power necessary for the competition in the new century.

The initiation of the necessary reforms to revive the domestic sources of America's global leadership took the form of balancing both foreign policy objectives and the instruments to achieve them. In the Middle East, the Obama administration redirected national resources away from Iraq, notably through troop withdrawal and the reduction in American civilian mission, to have the leverage needed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Arriving at energy independence was made a top priority because it would help relief the debt and deficit, and most importantly to minimize the reliance on imported oil from the Middle East, especially as energy supply and prices continue to be contingent on the region's political dynamics. In this context, the Obama White House distanced itself from the "freedom agenda" of the previous administration and from any expansive objective to remake the region in the American image. Meanwhile, the Obama administration saw great merit in a policy of engagement with the Asia Pacific region not simply to take advantage of the region's promising economic and commercial dynamics to revive an ailing economy, but also to thwart a Chinese-led regional order that would be at odds with an American-led international system.

The regional environment of the Middle East was no less critical in shaping the trajectory of American foreign policy in the region. President Obama had to contend not only with the two wars he inherited from the Bush administration and their ramifications, but also with changing regional dynamics brought about by the popular protests that swept the region in 2011. The Obama administration made no substantial commitments for a political transition that would serve the aspirations of the general public, opting instead for maintaining a status quo that has long served American interests, especially in the realm of security cooperation. When the protests turned into violent confrontations in Syria, the United States had to contend with regional allies hell-bent on regime change and with staunch allies to the Assad regime determined to sustain the rule of their client in Damascus. US diplomatic efforts to

affect a political transition that would be in line with American preferences were thwarted by the Russo-Chinese veto and the two countries' normative resistance to what they considered Western encroachment on state sovereignty and attempts at regime change. President Obama resisted taking further steps to arm the opposition or embrace other limited military solutions not only because they were costly, but also because the most capable forces battling Assad were working against American interests and objectives. As the number of non-state armed groups multiplied, the US made counterterrorism the focus of its policy which made partnership with local forces the linchpin of its military strategy.

Looking at American foreign policy from a purely international perspective would not do justice to the views and perspectives of the leadership in the Oval Office. Such views would be more relevant given the higher expectations placed in the first African American president as a redeemer of an overextended nation from its self-inflicted wounds. President Obama had much leeway and influence on the direction of American foreign policy not only because he was a post-crisis president, but also because he never shied away from making use of the power the presidency has accumulated in more than half a century with a relatively passive Congress unwilling to exercise its power of oversight. Obama's educational, academic and professional background has long nurtured his perceptions of American politics and of the world around him. Understanding how Obama the person, the politician and the President perceived American power, the Middle East and the sources of its dynamics, and more importantly America's role in the world is indispensable to grasp his foreign policy choices.

President Obama made the understanding of American power, and more importantly its limitations, a critical reference point for his foreign policy choices. His resistance to be a "doctrine" president is in important ways the product of his belief that foreign policy should not be guided by predefined ideological dogma, but by the accurate perception of power and its limitations. Although he still believes in the preponderance of the US military, Obama contends that other elements of power like a vibrant economy, cutting -edge scientific research, world-class education and an adaptive political system are more relevant to the realities of the new century. American policy makers in the last half a century have invested heavily in building an unmatched military force, but failed to do so with the other facets of power which should define future American foreign policy. Such elements of power are indispensable to compete with a rising China and a competitive Germany, and above all to maintain American leadership and its credibility as the guardian of the international liberal order. A consequential downside of US military preponderance is the prescription of military

solutions to most of the threats and challenges that have faced the country in the past. Policy makers, therefore, should be wary of the excessive use of military force and have to strike a balance between the different components of power to advance American interests.

Obama's perceptions of American power and the limits of military force is more pertinent to the Middle East, a region he believes is distinct from places like Latin America, Africa and Asia. Obama sees the regional order in the Middle East crumbling, giving way to conflicts and profound changes that would play out for generations. He also considers the regional dynamics as driven by ideological impulses which date back centuries. Much like tribalism which has long defined the politics of Kenya, the home country of Obama's father, sectarianism is the root cause of the political divides in the Middle East which trigger political polarization and even armed conflicts. These regional dynamics have generated a complex regional environment that is hard to shape in the American image even with the exercise of US military power. In this context, the Obama administration saw more rewarding opportunities in investing the limited available resources in the Asia-Pacific, a region that figures prominently as the hub of international trade and finance. Presidential leadership's perceptions of American allies and adversaries in the region is of much significance in shaping American policy choices. Obama clearly holds starkly different views from his predecessor about Iran and America's traditional allies in the Gulf. While Bush considered Iran a rogue state and part of an axis of evil that poses a grave threat to American interests, President Obama perceived Tehran as a strong regional power with a "worldview" whose policies are strategic and not impulsive. As such, Iran should be accommodated and differences with its leadership can be mitigated but can by no means be eliminated, especially with the use of military force. In doing so, President Obama sees himself as defying both the Washington playbook and the expectations of America's regional allies. Obama also makes a distinction between the regional interests of Gulf states and America's core interests, contending that the United States cannot be the military arm of one faction against the other.

What follows from Obama's perceptions of American power and the Middle East is a distinct role for the United States to play in the region, one that should be neither costly nor transformative. Such role is informed by President Obama the realist and the idealist. From a realist perspective, Obama makes a distinction between America's core interests in the region, which should be protected even with the unilateral use of force, and less important objectives like the promotion of freedom and democracy. While still the guardian of the international liberal order in Obama's view, the United States should not embark on

remaking societies along ideological lines. The best course for the US seems to be the preservation of a regional balance of power, or what Obama calls a “regional equilibrium,” that is vital to sustain the already crumbling international liberal order. Because American power is not limitless, the US should lead by example to advance liberal values and a democratic system of governance. While the United States is still the exceptional power, it is not in terms of military might but rather with the power of its ideas and values.

To achieve its research objectives and answer the research question(s), the thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is a conceptual and theoretical framework which aims to delineate the strategy of retrenchment, especially within the spectrum of American foreign policy strategies, and to justify the choice of neoclassical realism as the best, but not the only, framework to explain Obama’s Middle East policy. Retrenchment occupies a middle position between minimalist strategies like isolationism and restraint and expansive strategies like liberal hegemony. This does not mean, however, that retrenchment was the only foreign policy approach pursued by President Obama but is rather the guiding principle of his foreign policy choices. It is worth noting that a strategy of liberal hegemony, which has long defined American strategic thinking, remains at the heart of American foreign policy but the instruments to sustain it have adapted to the realities of the new century. Retrenchment therefore seeks to balance ends and means through scaling back costly security commitments, shifting responsibilities onto local actors and regional allies, accommodating rivals and adversaries, relying on diplomacy and multilateral institutions to achieve policy objectives and employing low-cost and light-footprint instruments to conduct military operations. Looking at his Middle East policy approach from a neoclassical realist perspective, this chapter argues that international explanations cannot explain Obama’s choices on their own but through their interaction with domestic leadership, especially the perceptions of the president as the most dominant actor in shaping the trajectory of American foreign policy.

Chapter two traces the development of US-Middle East relations during the twentieth century and the commensurate multiplication of American interests in the region. While by the turn of the twentieth century American interactions with the region was dominated by missionary and educational activities, the discovery of oil, the Cold War, and the decline of European influence made the strategic significance of the region occupy center stage in the American foreign policy calculus. Depleting British resources after the First World War and its declining power thereafter meant the acceptance of the United States as a new major actor in the region to counterbalance both Soviet influence and the rising tide of Arab nationalism.



The recognition of and support for the newly created state of Israel steered the US to far deeper involvement in the region, thus making the security of the Zionist state on top of the list of American foreign policy objectives. By the end of the Cold War the United States arrived at a unipolar position in the region, a position that would prove short-lived given the cost of the transformative agenda the Bush administration envisioned for the region and the backlash, resistance and resentment this agenda has engendered.

Chapter three traces the strategic adjustment the Obama administration adopted towards the region which is evident in his policy choices across a number of cases throughout his presidency. Such choices, this chapter argues, are revealing of a strategy of retrenchment which sought to balance ends and means and reduce costs and minimize risks to achieve limited policy objectives. In Iraq, the cutback in American presence went beyond the much-publicized process of troop withdrawal to include the termination of the police development program, the reduction of US mission in Iraq by 60 percent and the decline in US civilian and military aid to the country. In Syria, the Obama administration not only steered clear of regime change after the popular protests turned in a violent conflict, but also resisted other limited military options like arming the Syrian opposition, a no fly zone, a buffer zone, or the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons. Obama's Syria policy was only one element of a larger approach to accommodate Iran for the sake of arriving at a deal on its nuclear program. Avoiding a military confrontation with Iran, even through a proxy war in Syria, and preventing Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon was a defining element of Obama's Middle East policy. When emerging threats seemed to threaten the old regional order, the United States turned to an international military coalition, local actors, regional allies and a campaign of airstrikes "to degrade and ultimately destroy" the group known as ISIS.

Chapter four attempts to explain Obama's Middle East strategy from an international perspective as a first cut theory. It argues that factors related to America's place in the international system and the changing nature of the regional environment dictated changes in US priorities in the Middle East. The relative decline the US has experienced after the Iraq war and the financial crisis along with the rise of other powers like China not only put limits on what the US could do in the Middle East, but also made the focus on building the domestic foundations of US global leadership a necessity. The boom in oil production in the US ushered in an era of energy independence and relegated oil in the hierarchy of US Middle East priorities. The popular protests that swept the region in early 2011 and their development in Syria into an armed conflict further narrowed American choices. The US had

to contend not only with outside powers striving to shape events in their own image, but also with rising non-state actors whose preferences were hardly in line with those of officials Washington.

Given the high expectation put in Barack Obama as a post-crisis president and as the first African American to occupy the oval office, his role in shaping the direction of American foreign policy is no less significant. Chapter five argues that what is more relevant in this context is the president's perception of American power, the Middle East, and America's role in the region. Such perceptions are in turn the product of Obama's social, educational and political background. The American military, as Obama sees it, is only one component of power which has shown its limits in achieving policy objectives. The US should rebuild the domestic foundations of its global leadership and adopt a whole-of-government approach to conduct foreign policy. Such conviction is more relevant to the Middle East. President Obama thinks of his country as a pacific country and that its future lies in the nature of its relations with countries in the region, especially with the rise of China and its potential to shape a regional world at odds with the international liberal order. America's role in the Middle East should never be transformational but should aim to protect core American interests while seeking to promote American values with lower costs and minimum risks.

# **Chapter One**

## **A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

## **1- Obama's Foreign Policy and Retrenchment: a Conceptual Framework**

Critics of Obama's foreign policy have offered a number of competing explanations of what constitute an Obama foreign policy strategy, but they have done so either through a narrow definition of strategy or based on a limited range of events and decisions. Looking at the patterns of his foreign policy from a more comprehensive perspective, this section argues that President Obama did follow a foreign policy strategy which centered on the strategy retrenchment. Retrenchment calls for scaling back international commitments, reducing costs by relying on low-cost instruments to achieve policy objectives and the involvement of allies to share in the costs and responsibilities. Obama's Middle East policy and his decisions to respond to emerging events in the region are revealing of retrenchment as the strategy of choice for his administration.

### **1-1 Obama and Strategic Thinking: Is there an Obama Doctrine?**

Critics of the Obama presidency continue to debate the essence of the president's foreign policy and whether it is guided by a single strategy or doctrine. While some presidents prefer to formulate a doctrine of their own, many others tend to avoid the conceptualization of specific foreign policy strategies leaving much room for flexibility in practice and for debate in theory. President Obama therefore is not the first president to avoid placing his foreign policy under a single doctrinal banner or to raise debates about the place of his foreign policy within the tradition of American grand strategies. While some critics believe that the president lacks strategic thinking and that his foreign policy was incoherent and inconsistent, others contend that the President's policy choices are revealing of a strategy that aims essentially at striking a balance between ends and means.

Among those who argue that the president lacks strategic thinking, Michael Hirsh seems to be the most vocal by making the case that President Obama is "the non-doctrine president" who "hasn't taken enough of a clear stand on any foreign issue to stake his credibility in the first place."<sup>20</sup> Hirsh's vision of a presidential doctrine or grand strategy as an expensive venture that aims to promote American exceptionalism seems to guide his view that Obama is a no-doctrine president. What Hirsh sees as Obama's tendency to reduce America's presence abroad can in itself be revealing of the president's doctrine; to do less

---

<sup>20</sup>Michael Hirsh, "Obama has no Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/03/obama-has-no-doctrine/73171/>

internationally because of domestic constraints. Leslie Gelb contends that, although President Obama avoided costly ventures and managed complex challenges reasonably well, his foreign policy “lacks a strategic framework” with “the paucity of genuine strategic thinking” as its hallmark.<sup>21</sup> Gelb faults Obama on his lack of faith in what American power can do, but he downplays the president’s ability to grasp the limits of American power, which is a key ingredient of strategy making. Apart from his Southeast Asian policy to tame a rising China, Jackson Diehl considers Obama’s foreign policy as “anachronistic” and his administration as “notable for its lack of grand strategy- or strategists.”<sup>22</sup> Diehl’s assessment, like many of Obama’s critics, is only partial as it is made with reference to the President’s first two years in office rather than to his entire presidency. Niall Ferguson assesses Obama foreign policy from a regional perspective arguing that the Obama administration’s response to the changes that swept the Middle East since early 2011 are revealing of a “lack of any kind of coherent strategy” and of the administration’s inability not only to prioritize, which is central to the making of grand strategy, but also to recognize the need to do so.<sup>23</sup> Ferguson’s analogy between the Obama administration and Nixon’s in terms of strategy making is clearly misplaced since the two administrations operated in entirely different domestic and regional environments.

What seems to be a lack of a foreign policy strategy under Obama would come as no surprise even to the President given his ambivalence about doctrines and strategies, especially when presupposed to be well-articulated and followed through consistently. In his interviews the President resisted the articulation of a clear and simplified strategy for his foreign policy. In his last year in office, Obama told Charlie Rose of PBS that he has “always shied away from labelling my foreign policy under a single banner” but he noted that the guiding principle of his foreign policy “has been to be very practical in thinking about how to advance U.S. interests.” Obama further explained that the two main core interests he stood to defend are American security and prosperity through the promotion of an international liberal order that, according to the President, has served not only the United States but the whole humanity.<sup>24</sup> Obama’s grand strategy seems to center around the theme of primacy, alternatively called

---

<sup>21</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, “The Elusive Obama Doctrine,” *The National Interest*, no. 121. (Sep/Oct 2012): 121, pp 18-28.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson Diehl, “Obama Foreign Policy Needs an Update,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/21/AR2010112102263.html>

<sup>23</sup> Niall Ferguson, “Wanted: A Grand Strategy for America,” *Newsweek*, February 13, 2011, <http://www.niallferguson.com/journalism/politics/wanted-a-grand-strategy-for-america>

<sup>24</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Charlie Rose,” *The American Presidency Project*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-0>

liberal hegemony, which has guided US foreign policy since the end of WWII. A grand strategy of primacy makes American security and prosperity the core national interests American policy makers need to defend. While primacy continued to be the major US grand strategy to date, it has been implemented differently by American presidents using other less overarching and short-term strategies. In a nutshell, there is more to Obama's foreign policy than the strategy of primacy and different critics have observed a variety of approaches that they believe are hallmarks of Obama's conduct of international affairs.

While Niall Ferguson inculpates the president for the failure to make strategic choices, Fareed Zakaria chose the term "the strategist" to describe Obama's ability to navigate crises and uncertainties by making the choices that serve American interests in the long run. According to Zakaria, Obama avoided confrontational language with Tehran in the popular protests that swept the country in 2009, but he was quick to press for a change in the Egyptian leadership following the upheavals of 2011. While he refrained from committing time and energy for the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, out of the belief that it would come to an impasse, President Obama invested in more global and promising issues like consolidating relations with India, Turkey and the European allies while rebalancing to Asia to tame a rising China and to comfort uneasy allies.<sup>25</sup> Robert Singh concurs that engaging other powers to deal with global problems is Obama's instrument of choice to manage America's relative decline. Such strategy of engagement was pursued with "an unrelentingly pragmatic, prudent and at times accommodationist approach to world affairs" with a belief in international cooperation and leading by example as the pathways to achieve foreign policy objectives.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from engagement and international cooperation, other critics who view foreign policy strategy from the perspective of the instruments used to achieve policy objectives believe the Obama administration adopted "low cost" and "light footprint" instruments that are revealing of an Obama doctrine. In the face of cuts in military spending and personnel and the reduction in US military presence in the Middle East, the Obama White House multiplied its reliance on the use of drones, missile strikes, and special operations forces to train local forces as a means to lower the costs of achieving policy objectives.<sup>27</sup> American intervention in Libya seems to be a textbook example of how the Obama administration combined a multilateral military operation, where the US assumed a position of "leading from behind",

---

<sup>25</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Strategist," *Time*, January 30, 2012, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2104842-7,00.html>

<sup>26</sup> Robert Singh, 4-10

<sup>27</sup>David Rohde

with low-cost military actions like airstrikes. What seems to be a secondary role of the US in military interventions like in Libya is driven by the belief that “America must act humbly in the world” because of America’s declining power and the resentment its past interventions have engendered internationally.<sup>28</sup>

The common and unifying thread of those who claim that Obama had no strategy at all and those who believe that there is an Obama doctrine but they diverge on its essence is the narrow perspective from which they judge Obama’s foreign policy. A narrow definition of strategy may deny any president of having or following a specific strategy. Conceptualizing grand strategy in response to specific decisions made by the president, in reaction to limited events or when the president is still in office will certainly provide only a partial view of any president’s foreign policy. A more practical approach to detecting Obama’s strategy should be comprehensive; it should look at the patterns of his foreign policy through his major decisions throughout his entire presidency. Taking only one event or decision in a limited span of time would not do Obama’s foreign policy justice, either in its conceptualization or in evaluating its shortcoming and merits.

The qualm that can be raised against Obama critics is their narrow definition of strategy as “a prefabricated plan, carried out to the letter against all resistance” which will make it impossible both for President Obama and for any other leader to come up with strategy.<sup>29</sup> A President’s foreign policy choices, even inaction or indecisiveness, are essentially the product of strategic thinking. Grand strategies are therefore “both implicit and inevitable” because of the limits on resources and the challenges of making strategic decisions.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, what critics of Obama believe is the absence of a foreign policy strategy is due to the incoherence of his strategy, which is a hybrid and mixture of strategies that include containment, engagement, assertion and at times regime change.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the United States has never had a single and coherent strategy even during a single presidency and hybrid strategies which “combine advantages and disadvantages of pure strategies” have been the norm rather than the exception.<sup>32</sup>

The two main grand strategies that characterized American foreign policy ever since the founding of the republic, namely isolationism and liberal hegemony, were not implemented

---

<sup>28</sup>Ryan Lizza

<sup>29</sup>Colin Dueck, p6

<sup>30</sup>Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p2

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

to the letter. The strategy of isolationism which characterized American foreign policy up to the start of the Second World War was interrupted with periods of foreign wars, namely the American-Spanish War and the First World War. American Presidents in this period also engaged in attempts of regime change in the Western Hemisphere to overthrow unfriendly regimes and put in place strongmen who would better serve American interests. While it is generally believed that containment was the overarching strategy of the United States during the Cold War, such strategy was aided by other means like regime change in Iran, rapprochement with China, interventionism in the Korean peninsula and Vietnam, and detente with Soviet Union by the end of the Cold War. In the case of the United States, the difficulty of making clear and preplanned strategies is a more daunting task thanks to the stringent conditions imposed by a polarized political system and an increasingly complex international environment where the United States has long assumed a leading role. Internationally, change is more unpredictable and allies and adversaries alike can behave contrary to the expectations of American foreign policy makers and to US national interests. Such domestic and international constraints can impose a change and adaptation to even preplanned foreign policy strategies.

## **1-2 Towards an Obama Doctrine: The Case for Retrenchment**

A more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualization of Obama's foreign policy strategy should take into account both the nature of grand strategy and the patterns of American foreign policy during Obama's time in office. Grand strategy involves more than making choices and prioritizing, as Ferguson argues, and more than the military instruments to achieve policy objectives as Robert Art contends.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, grand strategy does not have to be coherent and preplanned, it can be flexible, and include elements of other strategies.<sup>34</sup> Strategy is essentially about prioritizing, but it is also about striking a balance between ends and means. Protecting national interests and diffusing the threats to such interests are at the heart of setting goals a strategy aims to achieve. The means to achieve such objectives are not only military, but must also involve political, economic, diplomatic and developmental instruments. In a post-Cold War world scholars advocate soft power as another instrument to achieve policy objectives; soft power centers on using culture, ideology and institutions to attract followers without resorting to force and coercion.<sup>35</sup> In the twenty-first century, soft

---

<sup>33</sup> Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (USA: Cornell University Press, 2003), p7

<sup>34</sup> Colin Dueck, p6

<sup>35</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr, "Soft Power," *Foreign policy*, no. 80, (Autumn 1990): 167



power, which is the judicious blend of smart and hard power through an “integrated strategy” that uses available resources effectively, is also becoming the norm in the conduct of foreign policy.<sup>36</sup>

A close examination of the patterns of Obama’s foreign policy over the course of eight years reveals that prioritization was the guiding principle of the President’s strategic thinking and that retrenchment remained the strategy of choice for his administration. From the start of his presidency, Obama’s political agenda was dominated by domestic reforms rather than international affairs, not only to advance progressive policies, as Dueck argues, but also to revive the domestic foundations of American power and influence abroad. This was evident in the sectors that took priority in domestic reforms which include the financial system, energy independence, education, and scientific research. In terms of regions, the Middle East was relegated in the hierarchy of priorities and Southeast Asia became the focus of US diplomacy and national security. Within the Middle East, troop withdrawal from Iraq and the prevention of Iran from acquiring the nuclear bomb trumped the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and democracy promotion in the region.

In terms of defining national interests, realism rather than ideology becomes the guiding principle of the Obama administration. The two vital national interests that guided American foreign policy since the end of WWII, the national security of the United States and the promotion of an international liberal order that serves American prosperity, remained a top priority for the Obama administration. While democracy promotion and the defense of liberal values remained important, they should be attended to with the lowest cost and the minimum risks to America’s vital interests. The divergence in Obama’s perception of the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars are revealing of the hierarchy of national interests for the Obama administration. While Obama sees the Iraq war as a war of choice that did not threaten America’s core national interests, he believes Afghanistan is a war of necessity to diffuse the threat posed by el Qaida. America’s liberal values, according to Obama, are to be promoted by leading by example and nurturing American legitimacy around the globe and not through coercion and the use of force.

The set of instruments the Obama administration employed to achieve its policy objectives are more emblematic of its foreign policy strategy than its priorities or the hierarchy of its

---

<sup>36</sup>Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, Jr, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America*, (Washington D.C: CSIS, 2007), <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/csissmartpowerreport.pdf>

national interests. The overarching objective of these instruments is to lower costs, minimize risks and promote a positive image of the United States as a force of good. When no direct American interests are at stake, tools of light military footprint, like drones, airstrikes, special operation forces, become the instruments of choice to conduct military operations. Involving America's allies to share in the burden of security, especially in their respective regions, becomes a recurring theme for the Obama White House. Diplomacy, economic sanctions, and multilateral institutions were also seen as more effective and less controversial instruments than the direct use of force, especially when involving the deployment of large military forces.

### **1-3 Obama's Middle East Policy: Retrenchment in Practice**

Obama's foreign policy choices and decisions are derived primarily from the retrenchment playbook. Half of the federal budget cuts initiated by the Obama administration through the Budget Control Act of 2011, which calls for a \$2 trillion cuts over ten years, originated in the defense budget.<sup>37</sup> Such cuts along with changes in force structure alarmed the Pentagon, whose chiefs of staff warned that the United States would find it difficult to handle a major theatre war.<sup>38</sup> Going against the advice of the Pentagon and his close advisers to leave a residual force in Iraq, President Obama insisted on a complete withdrawal and, although embarking on a surge in Afghanistan, set a deadline to remove troops from the country. As the costs of the last two wars continues to affect the defense budget, the Obama administration continued to resist deeper military involvement in regional conflicts and "nation building" abroad preferring to direct available resources to "nation building at home." When military intervention seemed to be the right choice for this administration, low-cost and light-footprint instruments were implemented and regional allies were called upon to share costs and responsibilities. Diplomacy, accommodation and, when necessary, economic sanctions were alternatives to coercion and the threat of using force to deal with adversaries. Overall, scaling back commitments, reducing costs and accommodating adversaries became the defining principles of the Obama administration in conducting foreign policy.

Nowhere was retrenchment more rigorously implemented by the Obama administration than in the Middle East. Despite the changing regional dynamics, the Obama administration

---

<sup>37</sup>Dueck, *Obama Doctrine*, 95

<sup>38</sup> Colin Dueck, "US Military Could not Handle One Major Theatre Operation if Sequester Sticks," *Breaking Defense*, September 18, 2013, <https://breakingdefense.com/2013/09/us-military-could-not-handle-one-major-theater-operation-if-sequester-sticks/>

continued to see retrenchment as the most viable strategy. In Iraq, the scaling back of commitments went beyond the much-publicized process of troop withdrawal. While the Obama White House planned to compensate for a diminished military presence by an increase in civilian mission, the State Department eventually reduced the size of its personnel and the scope of its activities. The police training program the state department inherited from the Pentagon was terminated on the ground that it was neither efficient nor cost-effective. American foreign aid to Iraq, which is a benchmark of the US commitment to the country, was significantly reduced throughout the Obama presidency.

While the Obama administration embarked on reducing commitments in Iraq, it resisted making new ones in the post-2011 Syria. President Obama rejected almost all options of military involvement in Syria, from providing lethal support to the opposition, to a no-fly zone, to a buffer zone on the Syrian-Turkish border. When the red line Obama drew against the use of chemical weapons was crossed, the president backed down from a decision to launch airstrikes against the Syrian army and embraced a diplomatic route to put an end to the Syrian chemical weapons. As the group known as ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) gained momentum in Syria and occupied large swaths of territory in western Iraq, President Obama ruled out the deployment of American troops to break the momentum and formed an international coalition of sixty countries to share in the burden of Operation Inherent Resolve. The primary role the Pentagon assumed was that of an assistant to local armed groups and the Iraqi armed forces through training, advising, airstrikes, and intelligence sharing.

Obama's policy towards Iran also stands out from those pursued by previous administrations. The president's "extended hand" approach aimed not only to ease tensions with the Iranian leadership but more importantly to reach a deal on its nuclear weapons which is viewed by Washington as pivotal to rein in what is seen as Iran's expansionist course in the region. When demonstration erupted in Iran contesting the 2009 presidential elections, the Obama White House remained on the sidelines avoiding any confrontational language that might infuriate an already antagonistic Iranian leadership. In his public discourse, President Obama departed from the language of animosity towards Iran and embraced a more accommodating stance that depicts Iran as a strong regional power that responds to threats and incentives. To bring Tehran to the negotiating table and strike a deal on its nuclear program, Obama combined economic sanctions with multilateral diplomacy that involved even Russia and China, Iran's closet trading partners. The diplomatic course was maintained even while Iran

was engaged in what Republicans at home and America's allies in the region denounce as Tehran's destabilizing activities in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

### **1-4 Retrenchment in the American Foreign Policy Tradition**

While scholars differ on the elements of the strategy of retrenchment, they agree that its essence is about doing less, at lower cost and with minimum risk. Robert Gilpin contends that retrenchment, pursued through the reduction of foreign policy commitments, is one of the strategies implemented by declining states to strike a balance between the costs of preserving their position and the available resources to do so. Gilpin identifies three techniques by which retrenchment can be carried out. The withdrawal from existing political, economic, or military commitments overseas, rapprochement with less adversarial states, which can also be crowned with a formal alliance, and the appeasement of a rising power through compromise and concessions to avoid conflict and even to foster friendlier relations.<sup>39</sup> Peter Trubowitz categorizes retrenchment as status quo strategy that aims to preserve the nation's international standing, but also as response to overextension abroad. With the primary objective of "reducing the cost and size of the nation's geopolitical footprint", state leaders would engage in drawing down international commitments or reducing the size of the military. Reductions in the size of the military would induce the reliance on multilateral diplomacy as a "burden sharing" strategy to reduce the costs of maintaining the status quo.<sup>40</sup>

In this context, retrenchment seems to call for a radical shift from a deep engagement in the world to a complete isolationism that forsakes all forms of entanglements and conflicts overseas. Retrenchment is rather relative to conditions and circumstances and is by no means absolute. Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent conclude that the degree of retrenchment is proportionate to the degree of the state's relative decline; the more acute the decline is, the more radical the measures of retrenchment will be.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the degree of decline as the most revealing marker of the degree of retrenchment, the kind of policies adopted to pursue retrenchment are also revealing of the degree of such decline. Domestic policies are often adopted to deal with mild to moderate decline while international policies are devised to mitigate more acute cases of decline.<sup>42</sup> Domestic policies center on the objective of

---

<sup>39</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191-194

<sup>40</sup> Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011)

<sup>41</sup> Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (USA: Cornell University, 2018), 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 186

redirecting available resources to more strategic sectors which can be carried out through cuts in defense spending, changing the force structure and initiating institutional reforms. International policies aim at reducing global costs and commitments by redeploying forces, easing tensions and conflicts and sharing in the burden of security with others.<sup>43</sup>

If put in a historical perspective, retrenchment is a recurring strategy in American foreign policy and follows a common pattern both in the circumstances in which it was adopted and the measures through which it was implemented. With the great depression of 1929 the Hoover administration avoided “bold internationalism,” especially in Latin America, and relied “less on the stick of military coercion and more on the carrot of economic and cultural exchange.”<sup>44</sup> Based on the premise that a large military is not the only guarantor of national security, President Hoover initiated cuts in both the US army and navy. This was pursued through changing the mechanisms of formulating the military budget, narrowing down the range of contingencies the country should be ready to confront, and scaling back what constitute the nation’s “strategic interests” by making Latin America the primary locus of such interests instead of the protection of commercial routes on the high seas.<sup>45</sup>

The presidential scholar Stephan Sestanovich contends that American foreign policy was not guided by a single strategy of containment during the Cold War and a distinction should be made between maximalist and retrenchment presidents during this period. Maximalist presidents like Truman, Kennedy and Reagan tended to “think big” and to “develop new ideas, generate new resources, make new commitments [and] shake up the status quo” while retrenchment presidents like Eisenhower and Nixon came to deal with the consequences of the commitments maximalist presidents made and to help put American foreign policy on a more moderate track. Retrenchment Presidents worked to share burdens with friends and allies, accommodate adversaries, scale back commitments, and reduce costs.<sup>46</sup> Although retrenchment seems to follow extended periods of military interventions abroad, like the Korean War and the Vietnam War, there is more to retrenchment than ending wars and withdrawing troops. The common circumstances that usually gave rise to retrenchment include a declining economy, a disengaged American public, a lack of political foreign policy consensus, and a belief that American power and leadership is limited in stamping out global

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p2

<sup>44</sup>Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy*, 116

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p 117

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Sestanovich

problems.<sup>47</sup> The set of policies retrenchment presidents adopt tend also to follow a common pattern that is marked with the reduction in the defense budget, the redeployment of American forces overseas, the reliance on allies to share in the burden of security, the accommodation of adversaries, the marginal declining role of ideology in formulating foreign policy and an expanded role of diplomacy and multilateralism to deal with challenges.<sup>48</sup>

### **1-5 Retrenchment within the Spectrum of Minimalist Strategies**

While Obama's Middle East policy is revealing of retrenchment as the strategy of choice for the Obama administration, critics have argued that the continuation of some unpopular practices of the Bush administration attest to the assumption that the United States still abides by the rulebook of liberal hegemony.<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that retrenchment does not entirely forsake the use of force as an instrument to achieve policy objectives, nor does it preclude taking advantage of emerging opportunities when they can be exploited at lower cost and with minimum risks. Because retrenchment might signal retreat and weakness, the occasional use of force, or the threat to do so, can be viewed as the best course to comfort allies and deter adversaries. Daniel Drenzer contends that Obama's strategy is a combination of two strands; "multilateral retrenchment" which aims to reduce the country's international commitments and "counterpunching" which sees the expression of an aggressive posture as necessary to preserve the country's global influence and uphold its values.<sup>50</sup> While Drenzer makes a distinction between the two, "counterpunching" is in reality an integral element of retrenchment. In this regard, a distinction has to be made between retrenchment and other foreign policy strategies that incorporate some of its components and that call for a minimalist and a less expansionist American foreign policy. Such strategies, like selective engagement, restraint, offshore balancing and isolationism, although advocated by many realist scholars of international politics, are yet to be embraced by official Washington.

*Selective engagement* makes the distinction between vital, highly important and important national interests as the starting point of formulating grand strategy. Robert Arts contends that the protection of America's vital interest, its homeland security, and its highly important interests, the maintenance of a balance of power in Eurasia and access to energy, are of paramount importance which require military presence in Europe, the Persian Gulf and East

---

<sup>47</sup> "Virtual Meeting: CFR Master Class Series With Stephen Sestanovich," Council on Foreign Relations, July 7, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/event/virtual-meeting-cfr-master-class-series-stephen-sestanovich>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Robert Weiss, "Imperial Obama- a Kinder, Gentler Empire?" *Social Justice* 37, no. 2/3 (November 2010)

<sup>50</sup> Daniel W. Drenzer

Asia, the consolidation of present military alliances and the maintenance of a robust military to shore up overseas military presence and alliances.<sup>51</sup> The promotion of an open international economy, liberal values, and a greener environment, while important and desirable, should not be viewed as indispensable to the security and prosperity of the United States.<sup>52</sup> What clearly distinguishes selective engagement from retrenchment is that the former prescribes military force as the only instrument to pursue strategic goals while the latter looks at diplomacy and multilateral institutions as essential elements of power in the new century.

A grand strategy of *restraint* calls for a far more minimalist role of the United States in the world that is characterized by limited interests, narrow range of threats and a less active role of military force to protect interests and defuse threats. Barry Posen contends that the United States should forsake liberal hegemony and “must live in the world as it is—a world without a single authority to provide protection.”<sup>53</sup> Based on the premise that security is abundant, America’s primary concerns should be the prevention of single power dominating Eurasia, the control of the spread of nuclear weapons and the confrontation of terrorist organizations that directly threaten American security. Such threats should not be confronted through a large military presence overseas, which should be reduced significantly, but through the “command of the commons” which entails a significant naval presence that ensures quick access to parts of the world where these threats are likely to emanate.<sup>54</sup> Because a “hyperactive” and “heavily militaristic” American foreign policy is counterproductive, the United States should resort first and foremost to free trade, a robust diplomacy, and to multilateral institutions to achieve policy objectives and should eschew “elective wars, unrealistic nation-building schemes and the pursuit of hegemony.”<sup>55</sup> A key element of restraint that sets it apart from retrenchment is its rejection of military alliances as a shortcut for the provision of security. While restrainers call for the US to abandon NATO because it might drag the country in conflict that has little to do with its security, advocates of retrenchment believe the reliance on alliances would help share responsibilities, reduce commitments and minimize risks.

---

<sup>51</sup> Art, *Grand Strategy*, 8

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (USA: Cornell University Press, 2014), p xi

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p2

<sup>55</sup> John Glaser, Christopher A. Preble, and A Trevor Thrall, *Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America’s Broken Foreign Policy even Worse (and how we can recover)*, (US: CATO Institute, 2019 ), p 168

Like the strategy of restraint, *offshore balancing* is premised on the notion that preserving a regional balance of power through a strong naval presence is the most efficient and cost-effective strategy for the United States to preserve its leading position globally. For offshore balancing to work effectively, the US should leave its regional allies balance collectively against a rising power in Europe, Northeast Asia or the Persian Gulf and come to the rescue only when these allies cannot do the job.<sup>56</sup> When the balance of power is back, US forces should come back offshore unless US core interests are threatened. In this sense, US forces would intervene only when its allies have done the bulk of the job and thus, much like in the two world wars, the US would sacrifice the least among others.<sup>57</sup> Like selective engagement, offshore balancing looks at threats and the instruments to diffuse them from a purely military perspective while it overlooks the elements that have guided the United States to a position of preponderance. Offshore balancers seem to take for granted that America's allies would necessarily balance against a regional rising hegemon, paying less heed to the possibility that these allies might well join forces with a new hegemon to offset American hegemony.

*Neo-isolationism* advances the same principle of non-entanglement in foreign wars and quarrels pioneered by President George Washington. But in today's globalized world, it also calls for US disengagement from multilateral institutions that aim at collective security, especially through some sort of international law enforcement mechanism in military conflicts. Such strategy seems also compatible with retrenchment in that it does not call for "economic nationalism" but seeks to promote international trade and the exchange of ideas.<sup>58</sup> In its military facet, however, isolationism is distinct from retrenchment because it forsakes all kinds of military alliances, binding security agreements, and calls for the dismantlement of all military bases overseas.<sup>59</sup> Isolationism is the most minimalist foreign policy strategy and the one that bears the least resemblance to the strategy of retrenchment.

Obama's foreign policy is neither purely interventionist nor starkly isolationism. It aims to balance ends and means through a strategy of retrenchment. This latter aims to lower cost and minimize risks by seeking less ambitious foreign policy goals, reducing international commitments, and sharing responsibilities with allies. This would entail making cuts in government and military spending, accommodating adversaries and relying on less costly

---

<sup>56</sup>John J. Mearsheimer and Stephan M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no.4, (Jul/Aug 2016)

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Eugene R. Wittkopf, Christopher M. Jones with Charles W. Kegley, Jr. "American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process," (USA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 10-11

<sup>59</sup> Art, *Grand Strategy*, 176-177



instruments to conduct foreign policy like technology, diplomacy and multilateral institutions. Obama's Middle East policy is a textbook example of the strategy of retrenchment but it is by no means a simple reaction to his predecessor's. While critics have advanced different arguments to describe the essence of Obama's foreign policy, only few have explained it from a theoretical perspective. The aim of the next section is to explain and justify the choice of neoclassical realism as the theoretical framework that will best explain the determinants of Obama's Middle East policy.

## **2- Theoretical Framework: The Case for Neoclassical Realism**

Scholars of foreign policy and international politics have advanced a number of competing theories to explain American foreign policy. These theories can be broadly classified as systemic ones, which argue that the international environment and its dynamics are the most defining determinants of the state's interaction with the world, and domestic theories which attach higher importance to what happens within the state to explain its behavior on the world's stage. Others, however, suggest that neither international nor domestic factors are definitely deciding in isolation and that researchers should look for the possible interaction between forces from both levels of analysis to better understand the course of a state's foreign policy. This section will argue that the choice of theory depends first on the nature of the foreign policy issue under study and the conditions under which the state is operating. In the case of the United States during the Obama presidency, neoclassical realism provides both rigor and parsimony to explain the patterns of Obama's Middle East policy.

### **2-1 International Explanations of Foreign Policy and their Limitations**

Structural, or systemic, theories of international relations point out that the international system is the most influential determinant of the state's international behavior because it sets the boundaries of policy options available to decision makers and limits or expands the opportunities and constraints that influence and shape a state's foreign policy. Because analyzing the international system is indispensable to the decision making process, it should be equally significant for the task of scientific research and inquiry in the realm of foreign policy.

Realism has been the most influential systemic theory of international politics to date, albeit its critics have been downplaying its explanatory power in a unipolar international system. Structural realism, or neorealism, suggests that the position of the state in the international

system, determined primarily by the degree of its resources relative to other states, is the most decisive factor of the state's foreign policy regardless of its domestic political, social and economic dynamics.<sup>60</sup> Such theory is based on the premise that the state is a rational actor and the basic unit of the international system, that states are power and security maximizers, and that they work to do so in a self-help international environment that is not governed by a single world authority. In other words, states should aim to maximize their power in a competitive environment driven by the rule that power is a zero sum game.<sup>61</sup> Stephan Walt contends that "the question of who has power is the most critical factor that explains how politics proceeds" and because of this, states engage in competition "for opportunities to improve their power or security at the expense of rivals."<sup>62</sup>

The question of security is not a matter of consensus among neorealists and it has triggered a contention that brought to the fore two relatively distinct variants of neorealism. Offensive realists advance the argument that states are power maximizers because more power means more security. The primary objective would be to arrive at position of hegemony which would provide the least challenging environment for the hegemon to advance and protect its interests.<sup>63</sup> Such view is premised on power transition theory which suggests that a unipolar world, dominated by either one power or its allies, is more stable and secure. Abramo Organski argues that "world peace has coincided with periods of unchallenged supremacy of power, whereas the periods of approximate balance have been periods of war"<sup>64</sup>

Offensive realists' argument is often discredited by the idea that a position of hegemony would trigger counterbalancing from other states, either working alone or in alliances, to diffuse what they see as a common threat posed by the hegemon. Because the international system is anarchic, revisionist states would not only work to balance against the hegemon, but would also seek hegemony in their respective regions or seek global hegemony if they are already regional powers. In *Myths of Empire*, Jack Snyder contends that "counterproductive aggressive policies are caused most directly by the idea that the state's security can be

---

<sup>60</sup> Jean-Frédéric Morin and Jonathan Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Toolbox* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 317, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61003-0>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "US Grand Strategy after the Cold War: Can Realism Explain it? Should Realism Guide it?", *International Relations* 32, n. 1, (March 2018), 8

<sup>63</sup> Henry R. Nau, "Realism," *Routledge Handbook of American Foreign Policy*, eds. Steven W. Hook, Christopher M. Jones, (London: Routledge, 2011), 68,

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203878637.ch5>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

safeguarded only through expansion”<sup>65</sup> Snyder rejects the proposition that anarchy would necessarily push states to expand for the sake of security because states should assume that their attempted expansion would necessarily induce balancing behavior from other states which would reduce and not increase their security.<sup>66</sup>

Defensive realists, however, argue that the international environment is benign and secure, which is the rule rather than the exception. For this reason, states should not seek expansion or pursue aggressive policies because they are costly and counterproductive. The international system incentivizes states to embark only on moderate and reasonable behavior, namely to seek security by responding to merging threats in the international system. When states go beyond such defensive objective and get overextended, the causes are almost exclusively to be found in the state’s domestic policies.<sup>67</sup> For defensive realists, states should learn from the lessons of history which almost invariably confirm that aggressive behavior would trigger counterbalancing from other states and would result in friction and war.

The main limitation of neorealism has been its inability to predict the end of the Cold War and more importantly to explain American foreign policy during the post-Cold War years. While neorealism cannot explain some aspects of US post-Cold War foreign policy, it can still explain others. Stephan Walt admits that American policy in the Middle East in the last two decades has run contrary to realist expectations because the US lost trillions of dollars in the Iraq war instead of working to improve its relative power. Even such policy, Walt contends, can be partly explained by realism because by overthrowing Saddam US leaders believe they removed an antagonistic leader who was bent on acquiring nuclear weapons and dominate the region. Even with its aim of transforming the region into a set of democratic states, the US hoped to improve its power position in the region and maintain a position of primacy. Realism also posits that the international environment was permissive and the US did not have to contend with opposing rival powers and was able to pursue its objectives without much meaningful opposition.<sup>68</sup>

What neorealism failed to explain about US foreign policy after the Cold War, systemic liberal theories claim to account for with much more clarity. Liberal theories are based on the premise that liberal values and norms would be the best route for peace and security and that

---

<sup>65</sup>Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*(US: Cornell University Press, 1999), 1

<sup>66</sup>Ibid, 22

<sup>67</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “Realism and Domestic Politics” 191-192

<sup>68</sup> Walt, *US Grand Strategy*, 8-10

states which share such principles would rarely engage in conflicts. Democratic peace theory, a leading subset of liberal theory, suggests that democracies rarely fight each other and that turning other countries into like-minded democracies would reduce tensions and cultivate friendlier relations between states. Post-Cold War American foreign policy has been but an endeavor to spread democracy, and the Middle East was only the starting point of such idealistic mission. Kenneth Waltz argues that democracies are not of one kind and even if they are so it is still hard to imagine that a democratic state would continue forever to be so. Waltz further explains that “conformity of countries to a prescribed political form may eliminate some of the causes of war [but] it cannot eliminate all of them” and this theory “will hold only if the causes of war lie inside of states.”<sup>69</sup> Even if all states become democratic, the features that characterize the international system like anarchy and the lack of mutual trust between states would continue to influence how states deal with each other.<sup>70</sup>

Like liberal theories, international society theory, also known as institutional theory, believes less in the anarchy of the international system because states behave according to expected norms of behavior that are the product of the belief that states share common interests and concerns. These norms, rules and principles of international conduct usually translate into international institutions like the United Nations which governs the interactions between states. Hedley Bull, a leading scholar of this theory, contends that international law, diplomacy, sovereignty, and balance of power are a set of institutions through which states seek security and avoid conflicts and wars.<sup>71</sup> John J. Mearsheimer rejects the claim that institutions are an instrument to promote peace and avoid war because they have no independent effect on the state’s behavior. Such institutions only reflect the distribution of power in the international system; they are simply a reflection of the interests, goals and ideologies of the states that created them and they are often dominated by strong and powerful states.<sup>72</sup> What is common between liberal and institutional theories, and which gives them less leverage to explain the present study, is that they are more relevant to explain the interactions between states and the outcomes of these interactions rather than to explain the foreign policies of individual states.

---

<sup>69</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer2000): 7-8

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 10

<sup>71</sup> Morin and Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 319-320

<sup>72</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter, 1994-1995): 5-49

Unlike international society theorists who put emphasis on norms as institutions that govern the international system, constructivists believe that ideas constitute the guiding principles of the interaction between states. According to constructivists, states' interests and preferences are shaped not by their material capabilities but by ideas and discourse which, in turn, institute the rules and norms that govern the behavior of states.<sup>73</sup> When dealing with each other, states assume certain identities and they see and define others, their interests and their roles according to these identities.<sup>74</sup> Despite the role of ideas and discourse in guiding the state's foreign policy, it is hard to imagine state's leaders assuming certain identities or roles or espousing some kind of ideas and discourse without taking into account their state's position in the international system or its material power and capabilities. A developing country with limited means would rarely assume a leading role that is more befitting of a superpower.

Although these set of theories claim to be systemic in nature, they are founded on domestic assumptions in reality, with the exception of neorealism which is essentially grounded on structural premises. Andrew Moravcsik maintains that variants of liberal theory, like the democratic peace, commercial liberalism, and liberal intergovernmentalism "rests upon a 'bottom up' view of politics in which the demands of individuals and societal groups are treated as analytically prior to politics."<sup>75</sup> Constructivists also provide only limited explanation of foreign policy because leaders' subjective interpretation of the international environment, the national interests, and other states is based on social norms and ideas instead of the objective material reality.<sup>76</sup> Even defensive realism, which claims to be a systemic and a subset of neorealism, ends up combining both structural and domestic explanations to explain foreign policy. In *Myths of Empire*, Jack Snyder admits that most cases of imperial expansion were contrary to realist explanations because they were counterproductive, but he ends up relying almost exclusively on domestic politics to explain these aberrations instead of making structural variables the starting point of his analysis.<sup>77</sup> Offensive realism, with its emphasis on the role played by material capabilities of the state

---

<sup>73</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, No. 110, Special Edition: Frontiers of Knowledge (Spring, 1998): 41

<sup>74</sup> Morin and Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 321

<sup>75</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 5

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>77</sup> Zakaria, *Realism and Domestic Politics*, 178

and the international environment to direct the state's foreign policy, remains the most explicitly structural theory to explain foreign policy. The challenge to offensive realism remains its disregard of the role of domestic politics in guiding foreign policy which would make it incapable of explaining why states with similar power and position in the international system react differently to the same international event or stimuli. The role of domestic theories to explain foreign policy is therefore no less significant and even indispensable. Structural theories, especially structural realism, are more relevant of explaining the state's international behavior over a relatively long period and less relevant to account for a state's foreign policy in short to medium spans of time.

## **2-2 Domestic Explanations of Foreign Policy: A Limited Scope and Relevance**

Theories that attach more significance to the role domestic factors like the political system of the state, its economic ideology or its societal arrangements in shaping the state's behavior with the outside world are more relevant to explaining individual foreign policies than accounting for international outcomes. Such theories are far more pertinent to explain why state's leaders took certain decisions or responded the way they did to specific events. Scholars of foreign policy have developed a number of theories that range from the most general like the national character of the state to the most specific like the psychological state of leaders at the time when decisions are made.

Graham Allison's seminal work, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, is one of the most influential and comprehensive works to explain foreign policy from domestic perspectives. Allison provided two alternative interpretations to the traditional actor theory in an attempt to answer why the Soviet Union decided to place nuclear missiles in Cuba, why the United States opted for the blockade of Cuba as a response, and why the Soviet Union eventually withdrew the missiles. Rational actor theory purports that to answer these questions one must treat the government as a unitary actor with its actions as "purposive" and "centrally coordinated."<sup>78</sup> The starting point of this classical model is to understand why national governments, much like individuals, made specific choices and for

---

<sup>78</sup> Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (USA: Little, Brown and Company, 1971),5

what aims or reasons. Allison argues that treating national governments as “monoliths” misses two important points. The first is that these monoliths are “black boxes covering various gears and levers” which operate in “highly differentiated decision making structure.” The second is that state’s decisions are the result of smaller actions taken by a number of individuals with different roles “in the service of only partially compatible conceptions of national goals, organization goals, and political objectives.”<sup>79</sup>

In order to take these considerations into account, Allison suggests two alternative models; the organizational process model and the governmental politics model. Instead of looking at governments as rational actors, the organizational process model looks at “the processes and procedures of large organizations” that constitute the national government and the “patterns of behavior” that these bodies follow to produce outputs, not policy choices. Such outputs are essentially the results of procedural traditions and mechanisms that characterize these organizations. The governmental politics model looks at the “political resultants”, not the outputs or choices, which the various political players in the government aim to achieve through “various bargaining games.” Those players should be analyzed from the perspective of their position and power in the government and their perceptions and motivations.<sup>80</sup>

Domestic sources of foreign policy can also be divided into direct and indirect, with the former described by James Rosenau as “source variables” and the other as “national attributes.” Source variables include leaders as individuals along with their traits and personalities, and societal sources which pertain to political influencers like political parties, interest groups and public opinion. The national attributes of the state comprise the size of its economy, its population, and the type of its political system.<sup>81</sup> John Spanier suggests that these sources have varying degrees of influence on policy making, with the variables closer to the center exercising greater influence than others. In this context, individuals as leaders constitute the “inter-most layer”, the societal factors the “outer-most layer” and the middle layer is represented by the government bureaucracy and its institutions.<sup>82</sup> In the same context,

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>81</sup>James N. Rosenau, ed., *Comparing Foreign Policies: Theories, Findings and Methods* (New York: Halsted Press, 1974), 121-124

<sup>82</sup> John Spanier and Eric M. Uslaner, *How American Foreign Policy is Made* (USA: Krieger Publishing Co. Inc. 1978)

decision makers do not exert the same influence; the higher the individual is in the hierarchy of responsibility the more influence he would exert to shape foreign policy outcomes. Those leaders are also influenced by their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions, and they also proceed in management styles of their own.

The role of decision makers in shaping foreign policy has taken a center stage in the study of foreign policy which also calls for a more in-depth understanding of these leaders' psychologies, perceptions and ideas. Henry Kissinger best demonstrates the weight leaders have on the making of foreign policy when he attested that as an academic, he "tended to think of history as run by impersonal forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the difference personalities make"<sup>83</sup> Milton Rosenberg suggests that decision makers are the most deciding determinant of foreign policy making concluding that disarmament in the Cold War was primarily the outcome of the views and beliefs held by Soviet and American leaders. Such emphasis on decision makers is grounded on the belief that foreign policy is agent-oriented and actor-specific because states as abstractions have no agency on their own and that "only human beings can be true agents."<sup>84</sup> Valerie Hudson argues that the study of decision makers is both necessary and inevitable because they are the ones who generate ideas, who create identities and change them, and who socialize others and can be socialized.<sup>85</sup>

Despite their rigor in explaining individual foreign policies, domestic sources cannot explain why states with the same domestic structures behave differently when faced with the same international stimuli. This would bring to the fore the role of the state's material power and capabilities and the international environment in which it operates in shaping foreign policy. Foreign policy elites do not take decisions without taking into account their country's position in the international system and the constraints and opportunities presented by the international environment. These leaders shape and are shaped by both the domestic and the international environment in which they manage the state's foreign affairs. If the shortcomings of the micro and macro levels of analysis could suggest anything, it would be

---

<sup>83</sup> Henry Kissinger quoted in Morin and Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 70

<sup>84</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis Classic and Contemporary Theory* (US: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p7

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 12



the need to take both international and domestic determinants when one attempts to explain a state's foreign policy or its grand strategy.

Both theorists of foreign policy, who emphasize the role of domestic factors, and theorists of international politics, who give primacy to structural effects, express the need to include both levels of analysis in explaining foreign policy. Valerie Hudson argues that though foreign policy analysis put much emphasis on the micro level of analysis, it should also be concerned with the macro level one which is the stage on which domestic factors, acting as actors, interact because "that stage sets some parameters to any drama enacted upon it" and "certain types of actions by human actors become more or less likely depending upon the layout of the stage and its props"<sup>86</sup> Although Jack Snyder claims to make realism the starting point of his study of failed imperial expansions, he asserts that "realism must be recaptured from those who look only at politics between societies, ignoring what goes on within societies."<sup>87</sup> In his review essay on Snyder's work, Fareed Zakaria claims that the author fails to successfully combine international and domestic explanations, but he still insists that "domestic politics has a crucial influence on foreign policy" considering it a "mistake" to put it in competition with international explanations because they are complementary not mutually exclusive.<sup>88</sup> The marked difference between international and domestic explanations is that the former provides parsimony while the other adds rigor and accuracy. Robert Keohane suggests that "the debate between advocates of parsimony and proponents of contextual subtlety resolves itself into a question of stages, rather than either-or choices. We should seek parsimony first, and then add on complexity."<sup>89</sup>

Although attempts have been made to combine international and domestic factors to explain foreign policy, they have been tried in an ad hoc and eclectic manner. Neoclassical realism is the most comprehensive theory to date that systematically and explicitly combines both systemic and unit-level variables to explain both individual foreign policies and international politics. Although claimed by its critics as only an extension to structural realism, neoclassical realism shares some but not all of the neorealist assumptions about the effects of

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid,161

<sup>87</sup> Snyder,*Myths of Empire*, 19

<sup>88</sup> Zakaria,*Realism and Domestic Politics*, 198

<sup>89</sup> Ibid,197

the international system on state's behavior and explicitly incorporates unit-level variables to provide a more comprehensive and accurate explanations. This study adopts neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework not for the simple reason that it seeks both rigor and parsimony, but also because of other factors relative to US foreign policy under study.

### **2-3 Systemic Change and Domestic Factors: The Case for Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical realists posit that a first cut theory of foreign policy should start with the study of the state's position in the international system, namely its power and material capabilities. Fareed Zakaria suggests that "a good theory of foreign policy should first ask what effect the international system has on national behavior, because the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations is its relative position in the international system."<sup>90</sup> Gedeon Rose maintains that the changes in the state's material capabilities would necessarily affect the state's international behavior because "as their relative power rises states will seek more influence abroad, and as it falls their actions and ambitions will be scaled back accordingly."<sup>91</sup> Davide Fiammenghi concludes that neorealists and neoclassical realists share two main assumptions; that an increase in the state's power will broaden its interests and role internationally, but a decline in such power would induce the state to espouse a more pacific and accommodating approach when dealing with other states.<sup>92</sup>

Along with these assumptions about the role of power in shaping the state's foreign policy, neoclassical realists also share with neorealists an "environment-based ontology."<sup>93</sup> Neoclassical realists contend that states formulate their foreign policies taking into account the threats and opportunities in the international system which will limit or expand the range of foreign policy choices. Because states operate in an anarchic and self-help environment, "incentives are extremely high for states to focus on external stimuli and craft foreign policies to respond to them appropriately."<sup>94</sup> In this context, states do not necessarily seek

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 197

<sup>91</sup> Gedeon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism" 152

<sup>92</sup> Davide Fiammenghi, Sebastian Rosato, and Joseph M. Parent, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman Kevin Narizny, "Correspondence: Neoclassical Realism and its Critics," *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018), 193-194

<sup>93</sup>Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 20

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

security but they respond to threats and opportunities by striving to influence and shape the international environment “to the extent that they are able to do so.”<sup>95</sup>

What distinguishes neoclassical realists from other realist scholars, however, is their belief that the effects of power and the international environment are indirect and complex. “Power clearly matters a great deal for national behavior,” Gideon Rose explains, “but its effects are indirect and mediated by other factors” like decision makers and their perceptions.<sup>96</sup> The effects of the international environment and its dynamics are not always clear even to foreign policy elites themselves and they should be best analyzed through other unit-level variables within the state. The influence of such variables would be more pronounced when state leaders operate in a relaxed and permissive environment. Norrin M. Ripsman and al argue that the foreign policy choices made in such environment “may have far more to do with the worldviews of leaders, the strategic cultures of the states they lead, the nature of the domestic coalitions they represent, and domestic political constraints on their ability to enact and implement various policy alternatives.”<sup>97</sup> In short, leaders are constrained and influenced both by domestic and international forces when they formulate and conduct foreign policy.

Neoclassical realism is the best qualified to explain Obama’s Middle East policy not simply because it combines rigor and parsimony, but also because American power, the international environment and domestic politics during the Obama presidency were not static but were changing and in turn exerting much influence on how foreign policy proceeded. American power clearly waned from the time George W. Bush took office in 2001 to the last years of Obama in office. Although the United States continues to be the richest country in the world, its power and influence have been seriously challenged by rising and rival powers with which American leaders have been forced to contend. The challenge to American primacy is not only material, but also ideological and ideational. American actions in the Middle East during the Bush years did much harm to the country’s image and what it stands for and triggered soft balancing from both state and non-state actors.

---

<sup>95</sup> Rose, *Neoclassical Realism*, 152

<sup>96</sup> Gideon Rose, “Power, Perceptions and the Cold War,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 38, no. 1 (March 1996): 166

<sup>97</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 30

As the Bush administration failed to achieve its objectives in Iraq with the help of thousands of troops and trillions of dollars and when they had to contend with very limited challengers, the Obama administration concluded that it could do little with limited means and a more challenging regional environment. The popular protests that swept the region in late 2010 turned into violent confrontations between opposing forces that had little in common in terms of political agendas or ideologies. Such dynamics were made more complex with the intervention of outside powers, which made any American military and diplomatic initiative a costly and daunting task. Instead of embracing direct military intervention to direct events, the Obama administration resorted to light footprint and low-cost approaches to preserve what is left of American influence in the region.

The role of leadership is no less significant in shaping American foreign policy, especially with Barack Obama whose coming to office was seen as moment of redemption to save the country from its self-inflicted harm caused by a foreign policy gone awry. Such high expectations in the first African-American president combined with the preeminence of his office in the realm of international affairs and a legislative that exercised no meaningful opposition, President Obama found the leeway to guide the country's foreign policy and shape it in his own image. Obama's perceptions of American power and its limits, of the Middle East as a place of less significance to America's vital interests, and of his country's role to direct events in the region, were strong determinants of Obama's Middle East policy. Such perceptions were the product of Obama's multicultural upbringing, his educational and academic life, and his sense of the world and American history. While the choice of such combination of realist and constructivist variables is not the only possible theoretical framework to explain Obama's Middle East policy, the next section will further explain why it represents the most cogent choice.

### **2-3-1 Realism, Power and the Starting Point of Foreign Policy Analysis**

America's power and position in relation to others have a strong say on the direction and choices of its foreign policy. Therefore, from a neoclassical realist perspective, the starting point for analyzing a country's foreign policy should be its place in the international system, and more importantly the degree of its resources and capabilities. The argument behind this

choice is twofold. Firstly, the relative power of a state is the “most generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations” and theorists who make domestic considerations the emphasis of their analysis, argues Fareed Zakaria, “often make hidden assumptions about the way the international environment shapes a state’s range of choices.”<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the relative power of a state sets the “broad pattern” of its foreign policy. The impact of structural determinants in general, and of the relative power in particular, is not always clear and therefore analysts who do not make this level of analysis their starting point “may mistakenly attribute causal significance to other factors that are more visible but in reality are only epiphenomenal.”<sup>99</sup>

In his seminal work *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, Gideon Rose contends that “the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven *first* and *foremost* by its place in the international system, and specifically by its material power and capabilities”<sup>100</sup> Such power will determine “the magnitude and ambition” or what Rose terms “the envelope” of a country’s foreign policy. Put simply, when a state experiences a rise in its relative power, it tends to exert more influence on others, while a decline in such power would inevitably induce a cutback in foreign policy objectives and ambitions.<sup>101</sup>

More specifically, foreign policy objectives are determined primarily by the state’s material wealth. When power is redistributed towards a particular state in the international system, this state will inevitably look for larger security objectives. “A more wealthy and more powerful state,” argues Robert Gilpin, “will select a large bundle of security and welfare goals than a less wealthy and less powerful state.”<sup>102</sup> In this context, a change in a state foreign policy is driven by its relative power, but also by the costs of the objectives it sets to achieve. When a state’s power declines or the cost of achieving its security objectives rises, a corresponding change in its foreign policy usually occurs.

This correlation stems from strong states’ disposition to formulate foreign policies on a “costs and benefits” basis to seek change or continuity in the international system. Whenever there is equilibrium between the two, the result would be that the costs to maintain the status quo exceed the state’s capability to do so. When in a dominant position, a world power would resort to a set of measures to preserve this position and these include the funding of the

---

<sup>98</sup> Zakaria, *Realism and Domestic Politics*, 197

<sup>99</sup> Rose, *Neoclassical Realism*, 151

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 152

<sup>102</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p23.

military, the support of its allies, the provision of foreign aid and the preservation of a stable economic system which all require a surplus in the wealth of a nation. If in a state of deficit, the costs of maintaining the status quo increase and a state would be less inclined to seek an ambitious foreign policy.<sup>103</sup>

Such imbalance between resources and international commitments is compounded when the state is overextended abroad. From a military perspective, resources are required to finance the army needed to achieve foreign policy objectives and promote the state's national interests overseas. "Once their productive capacity was enhanced" explains Paul Kennedy, "countries would normally find it easier to sustain burdens of paying for large-scale armaments in peacetime and of maintaining and supplying armies and fleets in wartime." But when a state is overextended overseas through wars and conquests, the benefits of overseas presence outweigh the costs of maintaining it, an imbalance that can be further exacerbated if the state is in relative economic decline.<sup>104</sup>

The disparity between resources and commitments is better illustrated by what Samuel Huntington calls the "Lippmann Gap." Walter Lippmann historically explains the recurring change in the gap between American foreign policy commitments and the available resources to meet them. In the first three decades after its independence, the U.S. experienced a state of "insolvency" when material capabilities exceeded commitments. After 1823 and up to late nineteenth century, when American interests were limited to the Western Hemisphere, this imbalance receded, but occurred again after the American-Spanish War and the acquisition of new territories. Thanks to the overwhelming wealth of the U.S. after the Second World War, its strategic alliance with France and Britain, and the economic recovery of Germany and Japan, the country reached "a comfortable surplus of power" in international affairs.<sup>105</sup>

In essence, relative decline of a given state, or the limits on available resources, would induce a change in foreign policy either through narrowing foreign policy objectives and commitments, adopting less expensive instruments to achieve them or the combination of both. While examples abound on how relative decline in power and resources induced a change in foreign policy behavior and often the adoption of measures of retrenchment, the British case by the end of the nineteenth century is a relevant case in point. Britain faced

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 156-157

<sup>104</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1987), p xvi

<sup>105</sup> Samuel Huntington, "Coping with the Lippmann Gap," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 3, (1987/1988): pp 453-454

serious economic setbacks that were the product of the rise of new industrial powers and the loss of its leading position in many industrial sectors. “With the passage of time,” writes Aaron Friedberg, “Britain found it more difficult to maintain its place in the peacetime military competition and became less capable of waging sustained, intensive warfare than several of its rivals.”<sup>106</sup>

Britain’s financial difficulties led to its inability to expand defense spending to maintain a far-flung empire and contributed eventually to a change in its foreign policy. Political leaders had two choices to mitigate a strained budget; scaling back the country’s international commitments or increasing military spending to sustain these commitments at the expense of providing for the welfare system. Alternatively, the conservative government of the time adopted a range of retrenchment measures like the resort to diplomacy, sometimes in the form of appeasement, and the conclusion of security agreements to reduce threats to its national interests. It also introduced more efficient ways in managing the defense budget and prompted its colonies to share in the burden of security.<sup>107</sup>

In the American case, the country returned again to a state of “insolvency” in the 1960s when international commitments exceeded available resources. As the U.S. was going through a period of relative decline, the power of emerging states like Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union was on the rise, with the latter charting a path of military modernization. While U.S. commitments in Southeast Asia were scaled back after the Vietnam War, commitments to the Middle East were expanded remarkably through the Carter Doctrine and Reagan’s efforts to keep Gulf oil under Western influence. In the Third World, new threats emerged that were less amenable to direct military interventions which ranged from defiant communist states, communist groups in countries allied with the West and the inception of non-state actors and intransigent regime across the Muslim World. Such international pressures were aggravated by domestic constraints like the decline in military spending, the growing inefficiency of military force, and the increasing power of Congress over the presidency.<sup>108</sup>

In response to this “insolvency,” successive administrations adopted a variety of measures that largely followed the British example. At the strategic level, Nixon initiated a doctrine that centered on the wisdom of relying on regional allies, mainly Iran in the Middle East, to

---

<sup>106</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p 295.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 297-298

<sup>108</sup> Huntington, *Lippmann Gap*, 454-455

take up the burden of security while the U.S. role was limited to the provision of military assistance and arms sales. While the Carter administration pursued the same course of relying on “regional influentials,” it also pressed NATO allies and Japan to increase their military spending. At the diplomatic level, Nixon pioneered a diplomatic opening with China that aimed at rapprochement and a policy of détente with the USSR which culminated in arms control treaties. The changing perception of national interests by the new Egyptian leadership provided the groundwork for the realignment of Egypt with the west which culminated in the Camp David accords. Along with combining diplomacy and the threat to use force to deal with adversaries, Reagan embraced an approach of “rhetorical assertion” to reverse the widespread perception of American weakness and decline.<sup>109</sup>

In a more historical and systematic study of the correlation between decline and retrenchment, Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent concluded that in the eighteen states they examined which faced relative decline, no less than eleven and no more than fifteen cases resorted to retrenchment as a strategy of foreign policy adjustment. Because of their diminishing resources these states tended to avoid the initiation or the escalation of military conflicts and offered concessions to adversaries in places where strategic interests were less vital. In response to international conditions, these states tended to “renounce risky ties, increase reliance on allies or adversaries, draw down their military obligations, and imposed adjustment on domestic population.”<sup>110</sup>

Such historical accounts demonstrate that a change in foreign policy behavior is inevitable when the state experiences decline in power or limits on resources. But the nature of such resources also changes over time. While large armed forces underpinned the strength of states in the past, they have been rendered less relevant and decisive in the present thanks to the emergence of new technologies and actors that would do more harm than a standing army. In formulating their foreign policies, states now have to take in account the complexities that emanate from a globalized and interconnected world like the role of multilateral institutions, non-state actors and the pressure that world public opinion can exert in the age of the internet and social media.

One of the arguments that might be raised against the hypothesis of the correlation between relative decline and the policy of retrenchment is that American decline is arguably not as

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 457-458

<sup>110</sup> Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, “Graceful Decline: The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment” *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 9-10



serious as that which confronted previous great powers. From a classical realist perspective, strong states retrench when the incentives for expansion subside. Moreover, a certain, or higher degree, of decline is not needed to adopt retrenchment because the level of decline dictates the same level of retrenchment; when decline is modest and transient so is the degree of retrenchment. The same study by Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent found that “knowing only a state’s rate of relative economic decline explains its corresponding degree of retrenchment in as much as 61%” of the cases they examined.<sup>111</sup> Looking closely into the state of American power and the changing distribution of wealth away from United States to other emerging states and even non-state actors would be necessary to grasp how such systemic change triggered a shift in foreign policy behavior. From a neoclassical perspective, systemic determinants of foreign policy are not limited to the degree of the state’s power and capabilities, but also involve the nature and dynamics of the international environment in which the state operates. Such environment, much like the state’s power and position in the international system, incentives states to react to threats and opportunities.

### **2-3-2 The International Environment and the Context of Foreign Policy Making**

At the international level, a country’s foreign policy is determined not only by its place in the international system, but also by the nature of the system itself, and more specifically the extent to which it allows for the adoption of a more ambitious foreign policy. Gideon Rose contends that the international environment is anarchic and states seek to control this environment by responding to the uncertainties. Regardless of the nature and extent of their interests, states “are likely to want more rather than less external influence, and pursue such influence to the extent that they are able to do so.”<sup>112</sup> Even if a state’s relative power is in decline and does not allow for an expansive foreign policy, it would still need to respond to what happens in the international environment given that such environment is as changing as the relative power of the state.

The international environment also presents states with “constraints and opportunities” which leaders take into account when formulating foreign policy. Starting from the same premise that this environment is anarchic, Norrin Ripman contends that the stakes are so high for any miscalculated behavior and therefore “states are compelled to select foreign policies that are most appropriate to systemic circumstances.” What neoclassical realists share as a

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Rose, *Neoclassical Realism*, p 8

fundamental approach to the study of foreign policy is an “environment-based ontology, granting primacy to the political environment within which states interact.”<sup>113</sup>

David Dessler draws an interesting parallel between the environment of a state and an office building. He argues that the environment is the “settings” or the “context” where actions take place. As the office building conditions the daily activities of workers, the international environment also imposes “enduring set of conditions that constrains and disposes, shapes and shoves [the] behavior” of states. While moving around the office building, workers, following the dictates of rationality, use hallways and doors and not air conditioning ducts or windows. While workers who follow the expected patterns of behavior would survive and even flourish in their careers, those who defy such patterns would be exposed to the risks and uncertainties.<sup>114</sup>

As simplistic as this analogy might seem, it offers another dimension to the structural theory which advances the centrality of the distribution of power among states and the anarchic nature of the international system. The added value of this description is the “assumption of rationality” which Robert Keohane argues provides a link between the “system structure and actor’s behavior.”<sup>115</sup> Such assumption posits that leaders are expected to respond to the constraints and opportunities present in their environment. Driven by the same assumption, Keohane contends that states are “sensitive to costs” and therefore they are constantly engaged in “carefully calculating the costs of alternative courses of action and seeking to maximize their expected utility.”<sup>116</sup>

With regard to costs and benefits, the analogy of the relationship between firms and markets is useful here to demonstrate how the international environment affects the behavior of states. Economists postulate that firms seek to maximize profits not only to secure “reasonable” gains, but also because the “self-help” environment “forces” them to do so. In the same vein, states “are driven by the system’s competitive imperative,” which in turn forces them to adopt “influence maximizing” behavior.” While some states choose to adopt risky policies that generate short-term profits, others are more cautious and seek long-term strategies that

---

<sup>113</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, “Neoclassical Realism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, November 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-36>

<sup>114</sup> David Dessler, “What’s at Stake at the Agent Structure Debate,” *International Organization* 43, no. 3 (Summer, 1989): 466

<sup>115</sup> Robert Keohane quoted in Dessler *What’s at Stake*, 459

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

yield sub-optimal and immediate gains.<sup>117</sup> The choice of either course would largely be determined by the extent to which the international environment constrains or incentivizes them to do so through the opportunities it presents.

While the influence of the international environment on a state's foreign policy is evident, what is more central to the debate is what kind of environment induces what sort of policy response. In their recently developed model of neoclassical realism, Norrin Ripsman, Jeffery Taliaferro and Steven Lobell argue that the nature of the state's strategic environment is a key variable of neoclassical theory. They contend that clarity and complexity of the environment are key systemic variables that determine and influence a state's strategic choices. Clarity concerns the extent to which threats and opportunities are "discernable". Clear threats, for example, can be discerned by the degree of hostility and material capabilities of adversaries, while clear opportunities can be understood by the material advantage of the state and the lack of resolve on the part of its adversaries.<sup>118</sup> The extent to which such environment is permissive or restrictive reveals the degree of its complexity because "restrictive and permissive strategic environments exist along a continuum with the former entailing relatively less complexity than the latter because there are fewer viable alternatives to redress threats or exploit opportunities."<sup>119</sup>

Although clarity and complexity are still problematic to define and measure, they still offer a useful framework to understand the influence of the systemic and sub-systemic, or regional, environment on a state's foreign policy choices. In essence, states seek to maximize influence through mitigating threats and exploiting opportunities, but can do so only to the extent that their environment allows. Because a state does not exist or conduct its foreign policy in the void, taking into account other actors' intentions, their material capabilities and the extent to which they are willing to use such capabilities to achieve their objectives into account is key to formulating and conducting foreign policy. When other actors' intentions are not clear, the means at their disposal to conduct foreign policy is beyond the material, and when their willingness to deny the other what they want and to achieve their objectives is evident, a state is likely to pursue a more restrained foreign policy unless a clear threat to its core national interests and its survival is imminent. While relative power and the international environment as systemic factors exercise pressure on decision makers to behave in predictable ways, it is

---

<sup>117</sup> Zakaria, *Realism and Domestic politics*, 193-194

<sup>118</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 47-48

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p 53

still unclear how such factors affect the course of the state's foreign policy. What is needed, therefore, is the understanding of the interaction between systemic variables and foreign policy behavior, which can be only possible through the examination of intervening variables at domestic level of analysis.

### **2-3-3 Intervening Variables, Leaders' Perceptions and Foreign Policy Making**

While relative power and the international, or regional, environment provide parsimony in explaining Obama's Middle East policy, such explanation still lacks rigor and clarity. The influence of the state's relative power on the conduct of foreign policy is "indirect and complex" because there are other unit-level variables at play through which this power is exercised. In other words, there must be a "transmission belt" that would translate state capabilities into certain foreign policy behavior.<sup>120</sup> State leaders, the political system, the nation's strategic culture are few domestic factors among many that influence the interpretation of the state's relative power and the international environment before decisions are taken and implemented.

Because the real decision makers are leaders of the state, it is their perception of national power and the international environment that matters most to understand why a certain state followed a certain foreign policy course. The conduct of foreign policy, moreover, is subject not only to how leaders perceive their country's relative power but also to the ability of these leaders to subtract resources while dealing with the state institutions or taking into account domestic politics and public opinion. The influence of such variables is more evident when states with relatively similar or close relative power act differently even when facing similar threats and opportunities. While power can limit or expand the policy options available at the state's disposal, it rarely determines which option leaders select to deal with a certain issue.<sup>121</sup>

Theoretical and methodological pluralism, the combination of systemic realist variables with 'intersubjective' understanding of them, is therefore needed to fully understand foreign policy making.<sup>122</sup> The advantage of such approach is the facilitation of richer analyses of individual foreign policies to avoid the 'blind spots' that accompany purely realist

---

<sup>120</sup> Rose, *Neoclassical Realism*, 146

<sup>121</sup> Ibid

<sup>122</sup> Anders Wivel, "Explaining why state X made a certain move last Tuesday: the promise and limitations of realist foreign policy analysis," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, no 8, (December 2005): 370

interpretations of them. While realist interpretations of international politics were relevant in a bipolar Cold War world, a pluralist approach can make more sense of an increasingly complex and unclear international environment.<sup>123</sup> In a nutshell, realists interpretations of foreign policy posit that relative power and the international environment exercise pressure on decision makers to behave in a more or less predictable way to threats or opportunities, but it remains unclear how they do so without analyzing the various more intricate factors that are present when foreign policy decisions are made or grand strategies are formulated.

Despite the rigor and parsimony that such ‘pluralistic’ approach promises to understand foreign policy, it is not clear what unit-level variables are present while foreign policy is made and how they influence foreign policy. In their most recent study on neoclassical realism and particularly on how can unit-level variables be incorporated in the realist explanations of foreign policy and international politics, Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro, and Steven Lobell suggest four broad categories of such variables which are images and perceptions of state leaders, the state’s strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutional arrangements.<sup>124</sup> The authors argue that such variables “represent the central intervening variables that can affect a state’s foreign policy responses, especially under the conditions of a permissive strategic environment”.<sup>125</sup>

While such variables add explanatory power to the often general explanations offered by realist approaches, they should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Leaders’ perceptions for example cannot be understood without a close examination of the state’s strategic culture because leaders’ perceptions are partly the product of their environment and its influences. The policy of the ‘dual containment’ of Iran and Iraq adopted by the Clinton administration has its roots in U.S. Soviet policy during the Cold War and was largely part of the liberal internationalist culture that dominated U.S. strategic thinking after WW2. Likewise, domestic institutional arrangements have marked impact on the strategic culture of the state. The century-long policy of non-entanglement during the nineteenth century was unlikely to endure absent the power of Congress which repeatedly tied the President’s hands to act freely on the international stage. While U.S. involvement in First World War was an aberration, it was until after the Second World War and Truman’s expansion of presidential power that a change in U.S. strategic culture became apparent and publicly acceptable.

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

<sup>124</sup>Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 60.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid,61

Although leaders have to contend with the state's strategic culture and domestic political institution when formulating and implementing foreign policy, leaders' perceptions remain the most influential and deciding intervening variable for a number of reasons. Firstly, perceptions are decisive because they are those of leaders who make foreign policy. "If power influences the course of international politics," argues William Wohlforth "it must do so largely through the perceptions of the people who make decisions on behalf of states."<sup>126</sup> Perceptions therefore represent the most direct 'transmission belt' through which relative power of the state and the international environment are filtered and interpreted before leaders decide and implement policy.

Moreover, perceptions are inclusive of all the systemic and domestic variables. The constraints that emanate from the state's available resources, its political system, the international system and its norms are all filtered through decision makers' perceptions before a policy is made. Decision makers' perceptions of these constraints "is a crucial input to their perceived range of policy options."<sup>127</sup> The perception of constraints also influences the choices of decision makers in more intricate ways. Arriving at a policy option among many may or may not take an analytical course. Analytically, decision makers need to analyze the information available, the way to implement the preferred policy and its possible consequences. Decision makers may also resort to 'choice by default' by eliminating other available options through considering only the constraints on decision making, thus using these constraints to justify policy choices, a way that can be less troubling and is economical in terms of time and resources.<sup>128</sup>

The centrality of perceptions is evident in the gravity of misperceptions. While leaders' decisions may be driven by realist concerns in the first place, they might be inconsistent with realist interpretations because of the complexity of the international environment and the difficulty of judging it correctly. In consequence, misperception of one or all realist variables "should lead to behavior radically different from what we would expect from actors with more accurate perceptions."<sup>129</sup> In a case study of alliances in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth century, Christensen resorted not only to balance of power theory and the

---

<sup>126</sup> William Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (USA: Cornell University, 1993), 2.

<sup>127</sup> Yaacov Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking* (USA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p 42

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 43

<sup>129</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, "Perceptions and Alliances in Europe, 1865-1940," *International Organization* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 68

efficiency of states' defense systems but included leaders' perceptions and misperceptions of these variables. He concludes that nature of alliances, whether they are strong or loose, depends on leaders' perception of the strength of their frontline allies compared to their rivals.<sup>130</sup> He relates what he sees as the loose alliance between France and Britain immediately before WW2 to leaders' misperception of their countries' military power. While those leaders correctly gauged that Germany was stronger than either of the two powers, British policy makers gauged wrongly that their defenses would withstand the German military apparatus. In the same vein, Stalin misperceived the European strategic environment and believed the Western front would sap the German military might on the basis that British and French defenses combined were far greater than Germany's and that the Soviet union would later confront Germany on its own terms.<sup>131</sup>

The role of perceptions is vital not only in compulsive international environment, as many neoclassical realists argue, but also in permissive environments. The argument that when the international environment is compulsive decision makers, despite differences in their personalities and the political systems they operate in, would respond in an expected manner is not entirely accurate. More specifically, leaders' perceptions still matter even when the environment spurs them to act according to expected patterns of behavior.<sup>132</sup> When Hitler took power in Germany not all politicians in 10 Downing Street perceived it the same way. While for example Churchill saw it as alarming, Chamberlain perceived it as such only after March 1939 while others were unmoved by the political changes in Germany.<sup>133</sup> Likewise American leaders at the beginning of the republic diverged about the source of threat to U.S. security. For while Federalists saw France as a potential foe, Republicans perceived it as a potential ally, a source of aspiration and an example for emulation.<sup>134</sup>

What makes perceptions and misperceptions vital is that they are both detectable and generalizable. In his study of Soviet perceptions during the Cold War, William Wohlforth found that "perceptions of power were not wholly capricious, but followed a broad pattern" which was related to the real capabilities of the Soviet Union. In other words, there is a strong link between the real capabilities of the state, its place in the international system and how the

---

<sup>130</sup> Ibid,66

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p 92

<sup>132</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1976), 19

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid,20

state's leadership perceived them.<sup>135</sup> Psychologists' assumption that leaders often perceive the international environment accurately and that misperceptions are an aberration is not well-founded.<sup>136</sup> Misperceptions are not only common, but are also detectable, can be analyzed without resorting to intricate psychological interpretations, and can be used to explain 'patterns of interaction' in foreign policy behavior and international relations.<sup>137</sup>

While incorporating the study of leaders' perceptions to understand foreign policy is indispensable, it remains unclear whose perceptions are more critical. The answer to this question cannot be uniform to all cases and states. Neoclassical realists suggest the study of perceptions of the foreign policy executive (FPE) which may include the head of the state, their advisors, and the ministers responsible for foreign and defense policy because such body "possesses private information and has a monopoly on intelligence about foreign countries."<sup>138</sup> As lucid as such categorization may seem, it is still problematic to generalize it on all cases and states. The role of advisers and ministers can be very marginal in states ruled by authoritarian regimes or where one member of the FPE enjoys more leeway on foreign policy making than others. The way out of such generalization is to identify the statesman who enjoys preeminence in foreign policy making and whose views are the most decisive before any decision is made.

In the case of the Obama administration, the president's perceptions are the primary loci of Middle East policy making for two reasons; one is historical and concerns almost all U.S. presidents during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the second concerns President Obama. American presidents in the twentieth century played a key role in shaping American foreign policy and harnessed it to arrive at international primacy. This was true not only for 'transformational' presidents who set grandiose goals and made notable achievements but also for 'transactional' leaders who came with limited objectives and yet were more effective than most presidential scholars suggest.<sup>139</sup> The American president has also secured much preeminence, usually at the expense of Congress, with the rise of the 'imperial presidency'. As early as the beginning of the republic, proponents of a stronger presidency argued that the qualities inherent in the executive permits the president to be the "the prime agent in dealing

---

<sup>135</sup> Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance*, 302.

<sup>136</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, p 3.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, 61.

<sup>139</sup> Joseph Nye, *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era* (UK: Princeton University Press, 2013).



with foreign affairs” and the most qualified to respond to threats and crises.<sup>140</sup> Along with prerogatives granted to the president by the constitution, world events brought about a consensus on the centrality of the commander-in chief in conducting foreign policy and relegated Congress to a mere “supporter, modifier and legitimator of executive initiatives.”<sup>141</sup>

President Obama continued the norm of dominating foreign policy making with the marginal role of Congress. On the issue of using force specifically, Obama remained as his predecessor the ultimate ‘decider’ with the legislative across the political spectrum working “to avoid their constitutional duty to check the commander in chief in substantive and legislative ways.”<sup>142</sup> Former senior officials in the Obama administration complained about marginalization, their lack of influence on policy making, and the micromanagement style of the day-to-day affairs.<sup>143</sup> Former Secretary of Defense observed that “the controlling nature of the Obama White House and the National Security Council staff took micromanagement and operational meddling to the next level.”<sup>144</sup>

Nowhere was Obama’s tendency to independent and centralized foreign policy making more apparent than the decision to back down from launching airstrikes on Syrian. His decision was surprising to Republicans and his cabinet members alike. Republican hawks in the Senate were angered after Obama’s promise of a military strike was broken while Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense were neither consulted nor present when Obama took the decision.<sup>145</sup> Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta noted that he had no knowledge of the ‘red line’ Obama set before the President made it public. Obama’s frustration with demands from officials in the White House, especially from John Kerry, to use force in Syria culminated in his warning to reject any proposals for military options coming from officials other than the Secretary of Defense.<sup>146</sup>

Identifying the perceptions of whom that matter is not the only task needed for a study to be complete but also the perception of what. As analyzing U.S. relative power is made the starting point of this study, the perception of such power by decision makers is no less

---

<sup>140</sup> Franz-Josef Meiers, “The Return of the Imperial Presidency: The President, Congress and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *American Studies* 55, no. 2 (2010),253

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, p 254

<sup>142</sup> Ryan Hendrickson, *Obama at War: Congress and the Imperial Presidency* (US: Kentucky Scholarship Online, January 2016), p 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14tqd3g>

<sup>143</sup> Shirley Anne Warshaw, “Obama’s National Security Cabinet: The Fight to Survive White House Micromanagement,” in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: the Obama Legacy and the Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley, (New York:Routledge 2018)

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*

critical. Because the correspondence between a decline in relative power and the contraction of the country's ambitions "will not necessarily be gradual or uniform," it would "depend not solely on objective material trends but also on how political decision makers subjectively perceive them."<sup>147</sup> To the extent that the international environment was critical in directing Obama Middle East policy, understanding the president's perception of such environment and especially his perception of the Middle East as source of threat or opportunity and its importance in relation to other regions is also vital. Obama's view of the regional powers in the region, as allies or foes, is a key factor in directing his policy. Even before coming to office, Obama described U.S. partners in the Gulf as "so-called allies" and Iran as "the new great power of the Middle East."<sup>148</sup> Perceptions of power and the international environment are inextricably connected to the president's perception of his country's role in the world and in the Middle East. Along with his view that the Middle East matters less to the United States and its interests, President Obama believes that "even if the Middle East were surpassingly important, there would still be little an American president could do to make it a better place."<sup>149</sup> Before a thorough description of Obama's retrenchment approach to the Middle East is discussed, a discussion of how US-Middle East relations have evolved during the twentieth century is indispensable.

---

<sup>147</sup> Rose, *Neoclassical Realism*, 167

<sup>148</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*

# **Chapter Two**

**US-Middle East Relations  
in the Twentieth Century**

**A Historical Background**

## **Introduction**

America's growing involvement in the Middle East during the twentieth century was commensurate to its expanding interests and the declining power of imperial European powers in the region. By the end of the nineteenth century, American presence was dominated by missionary and educational activities and minimal commercial intercourse. The first attempts by the Taft administration to invest in the region were thwarted by an entrenched European influence on Ottoman politics. With the promising prospects of large oil reserves in the region, American oil conglomerate had often to contend with the British administration and turned to official support to press for the observation of an equal opportunity principle. Britain's waning power dictated an abdication of some of its privileges and monopoly in exchange for American financial support and the transfer of technology and capital. American companies were able to stake out a share of oil concessions in Bahrain and Kuwait, but more importantly in the newly found kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The strategic importance of oil for American foreign policy during the Cold War induced a partnership between the oil industry and the American government, with the latter working to ensure an open door and an equal opportunity for the former to expand. The State Department and the Pentagon joined forces to make the building of a giant pipeline across the Middle East to Europe possible. With the advent of the Cold War, the US expanded its security commitments in the Middle East to ensure the flow of oil to the international market, prevent the Soviet Union from making inroads in the region, and weaken the rising tide of Arab nationalism and shore up the rule of pro-Western oil-producing states. The policy of containment was meant not only to win more allies and exert more influence at the expense of the Soviet Union, but also to fill the political vacuum left by Britain's waning power and influence in the region.

By the end of the Cold War, the United States came to enjoy unparalleled influence in the Middle East and around the globe. With Saddam's efforts to alter the status quo by invading Iraq, the Bush administration marshaled domestic and international support for a military action against Iraq to protect American oil interests in the region and to preserve an international order the West has helped create and nurture. The Clinton administration continued to view Iran and Iraq as a source of challenge to American interests and worked to contain both states instead of balancing one against the other. The events of 9/11 helped usher in a new direction of American foreign policy, one that is based not on containment or deterrence, but on preemptive war and the unilateral use of force.

## **1- Early American Encounters with the Middle East: Missionary and Educational Activities**

Throughout the nineteenth century, American missionaries were the forerunners of American diplomacy in the Middle East. Their activities were not limited to the spread of the Protestant form of Christianity, but extended to include educational and philanthropic endeavors. Such activities started as personal enterprises but steadily grew in scope to subsequently require the support of the State Department in many occasions. Although missionaries' objectives of converting Muslims to Christianity or other sects of Christianity to Protestantism were not always attainable, their impact through the establishment of Western-style school and college education had stronger impact on generations to come.

The first organized missionary activity in the Middle East was made by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions which was created in 1812 as a joint effort between the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, and the Reformed Churches. In 1820, they established their first mission in what was then termed the Near East. Their primary objective was to convert Muslims and Jews to Protestantism, but as their efforts were largely unsuccessful, they turned their efforts to converting the Greek Orthodox and Armenians to Protestantism.<sup>150</sup>

Different sects of American Protestant missionaries were active in different places in the Middle East. While the Presbyterians were active in Syria and Persia, the Methodists were working in the Balkans and the United Presbyterians in Egypt. Although less active and influential, the missions of the Reformed Church were conducted among the Arabs, the Lutherans among the Kurds and the Society of Friends in Palestine. Up to 1929, The American Bible Society distributed between four and five volumes of the Scriptures in different local languages.<sup>151</sup>

Missionaries' work expanded steadily and could claim 21 stations with 162 missionaries and 900 native assistant in Anatolia and the European part of Turkey by the end of the nineteenth century. In Persia, the Presbyterians extended their presence from Urumia, to Tehran, Tabriz and Hamadan and could also claim 128 station supervised by 42 missionary and 250 native assistant. In Syria, five stations were supervised by 38 missionary and by 1901 the United

---

<sup>150</sup> Robert L. Daniel, "American Influences in the Near East before 1861," *American Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1964): 76.

<sup>151</sup> Edward Mead Earle, "American Mission in the Near East," *Foreign Affairs* 7, no. 3 (Apr 1929): P398

Presbyterians in Egypt were running 220 stations and churches with 50 native preachers and 6500 communicants.<sup>152</sup>

The work of missionaries was not without setbacks. The first and primary obstacle was the hostility of the leaders of the local churches who regarded the presence and work of American missionaries as a threat to their control and influence on the local congregations. Therefore, local Christian converts were persecuted and looked upon with disgrace. In Syria for example, the Maronites were ordered to not visit, employ, salute, or do any favor to the newly converts to Protestantism. More than this, the trade of such converts was boycotted and teachers and ministers among them were banished.<sup>153</sup>

As other churches active in the region received direct support from the great powers of the day; the Orthodox from Russia and the Roman Catholic from France, the Protestant Church was in much need for help from official Washington. Such help was very limited as the young nation was busy with domestic expansion, the slavery issue, and more importantly bound with the doctrine of separating the state and church. Instead, American missionaries turned to British help as they were champions of the same form of Christianity.<sup>154</sup> When American missionaries received the help of the Department of State, it was because they were American citizens in the first place.

Although their work was limited in scope, American missionaries played a key role as diplomats for the American state. For more than a century, American people continued to perceive the Middle East through the missionaries' narratives and accounts. People of the Middle East, who knew little if any about the United States and its people, also made missionaries their source of knowledge of America and the West as a whole.<sup>155</sup> The image of the Middle East conveyed by missionaries was oftentimes inaccurate. When asking for funds in the United States, missionaries resorted to their defamed and stigmatized narratives about Islam and Muslims to win sympathy and support. In its appeal for fund from the Rockefeller Foundation in March 1915, the Board of Commissioners Prudential Committee claimed that "Islam has, in all history, been the foe of intellectual advance upon the part of the people it governed, and unprogressive in all modern measures for the preservation and promotion of

---

<sup>152</sup> John A. DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900-1939* (USA: the University of Minnesota Press, 1963), PP 10-11.

<sup>153</sup> Daniel, *American Influences*, 77.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

<sup>155</sup> Bayard Dodge, "American Educational and Missionary Efforts in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 401, (May 1972): 22.

health.”<sup>156</sup> American missionaries not only accused Middle Eastern Muslims of inferiority and lack of progress, but they attributed any progress made in these societies to their activities and efforts in the region. For the same reason to win sympathy and financial support, the Board stated that “the lack of advance during that last two thousand years or more in the country, until the entrance of American missionaries, is notorious” and “while the improvement made has been marked, it is only a beginning compared with the enormous amount yet to be accomplished”<sup>157</sup> In his comment on such appeal, the historian John DeNovo advised the historian to be heedful about the bias of not only missionaries, but also Christians in general who had acknowledged since the time of the Crusades little but evil in Islam and Muslims. Such bias had created prejudice and a distorted image of Islam among American and Western societies.<sup>158</sup>

One of the most consequential activities of American missionaries in the Near East was in the field of education. This was practiced through the creation of elementary and secondary schools along with colleges. The objective of such education, though mainly religious at its beginnings, was to reform the Near East through educating the youth in western-style education rather than through the coercion of the old generations.<sup>159</sup> American schools functioned in a way that American teachers trained older students who would in turn teach the younger students. In order to reach larger audience, the native language was the means of instruction; Arabic in Syria and Armenian in Turkey. The curriculum was simple and included reading, writing, and arithmetic, with the use of Bible as the main reading text. The impact of such schools was marked to the extent that in the 1830s the Ottoman Sultan arranged for the creation, with the aid of missionary teachers, of two schools attended by young soldiers.<sup>160</sup>

More important in influence and impact was the educational activities of colleges which were created and managed either by missionaries through the Board of Commissioners or independently. The American Board run a number of colleges in Turkey notably Anatolia College at Marsovan, The Central Turkish College at Aintab and the Euphrates College at Harput. Among the independent colleges that were established in the second half of the

---

<sup>156</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions quoted in De Novo, *American Interests and Policies*, 32

<sup>157</sup> Ibid

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Bayard Dodge, “Western Education and the Middle East,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 24, no. 4, (January 1952): 53.

<sup>160</sup> Daniel, *American Influences*, 80.

nineteenth century was the Syrian Protestant College which later became the University of Beirut, Robert College at Constantinople and Constantinople College for Women.<sup>161</sup> The significance of such college education is evident in the training of future leadership of the region in politics, economics and education. The graduates of the Syrian Protestant College, for example, created many advanced stores and trading agencies, and supervised banks and enterprises in the region. Between 1902 and 1910, the college's graduates who stayed in their countries formed alumni associations and a college magazine which used to air the faculty's views and narratives.<sup>162</sup>

The spur of nationalism among the Arabs and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was also a vital outcome of missionary activities. In the Arab world, Syria stands as the best example of the revival of Arabic as an instrument to bolster Arab nationalism. As the Syrian Protestant College grew more independent from its religious mission, it put more emphasis on the concept of Syria as state with an independent identity. The graduates of this college and other missionary schools and institutions made Syrian nationalism and patriotism the essence of their writings and intellectual productions. Butrus al-Bustani, one of the prominent intellectuals of the time influenced by missionaries, launched what he called *Al Madrasa al-Wataniyya*, a school based on secular principles which made the revival of Syrian nationalism at the heart of its educational mission.<sup>163</sup>

American missionaries did not only sympathize with the Armenian national cause but they also contributed in the political education of the Armenians in their schools and colleges. Moreover, they made their cause known to the American people and therefore strengthened public and government support for their nationalist aspirations. Armenian immigrants to the United States, especially those graduated from missionary colleges, returned to their country with American passports that granted them more immunity from the Ottoman law and helped them receive the protection of the American government.<sup>164</sup>

The introduction of the printing press to the Middle East was indispensable for missionaries to carry out their religious and educational activities. Printing was meant at first to provide the Scriptures in the local vernaculars, but it soon expanded to include school textbooks and even literary translated works. The press developed and was adapted to print in Arabic,

---

<sup>161</sup>De Novo, *American Interests and Policies*, 15.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

<sup>163</sup>Fruma Zachs, "Toward a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria?" *Die Welt des Islams* 41, no. 2 (July 2001), pp. 145-173, pp. 172-173.

<sup>164</sup> Mead Earle, *American Mission*, 403-404.



Armenian, Greek and Syrian. Although most of the works printed were religious, they also included geography, arithmetic and science.<sup>165</sup>

## **2- The Middle East and the Taft Administration: The False Promise of Dollar Diplomacy**

American trade and commercial relations with the Middle East can be traced back to the colonial era, but were small in size compared to that with the Western Hemisphere or Europe. English colonies used to trade tobacco, cotton and sugar with dried fish, spices and manufactured goods of the Middle East. New England's dried codfish was one of the most profitable imports to the region. Such limited commercial contact with the Middle East continued to be the norm during the nineteenth century and well into the beginning of twentieth century.<sup>166</sup>

The dollar diplomacy of the Taft administration at the turn of the twentieth century was marked with an increase in trade relations with the Middle East, with tobacco and licorice topping the list of US imports from Turkey. The American Tobacco Company invested more than \$10 million annually to grow and manufacture tobacco in Turkey. Its imports to the US amounted to more than \$2 million dollars in 1913. The value of licorice imported to the US reached 1.25 million dollars in 1912, most of which was the product of MacAndrews and Forbes Company which enjoyed a monopoly of licorice trade.<sup>167</sup>

Petroleum products and sewing machines figured prominently in US exports to the Middle East. The Standard Oil Company of New York (SOCONY) established its branch in Egypt in 1898 and a distributing agency in Constantinople in 1911. The company's trade was dominated by kerosene which was used for illumination and fueling petroleum stoves. Singer Sewing Machine Company had about two hundred agencies and stores in Turkey by 1918 and sold machines worth one million dollar a year. Such increase in commercial activities inaugurated the establishment of the American Chamber of Commerce at Constantinople in 1911 with branches in Cairo, Beirut and Smyrna.<sup>168</sup>

Although the Middle East and Europe were still of minor interest for US trade and investment compared to the Western Hemisphere, the department of state was ready to support US companies to expand the Middle East. President Taft's Dollar Diplomacy justified secretary of

---

<sup>165</sup> Daniel, *American Influences*, 80-81.

<sup>166</sup> Herbert Maza, "Turkish-Arab Economic Relations with the United States," *World Affairs* 141, no. 3 (Winter 1979): 269.

<sup>167</sup> De Novo, *American Interests and Policies*, 38.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 40-41.

state Philander Knox's attempt to press for an open door policy in the region. Thus, US companies began competing with their European counterparts to win a contract for shipbuilding and a concession of railroad construction in the Ottoman Empire.

When the State Department learnt of a Turkish shipbuilding program, it instructed its embassy in Constantinople to make sure that American companies bid for the project. Ambassador Straus was able to extend the deadline for bids submission but could not help win the contract, which was awarded to British firms. The State Department blamed Straus for the loss of the contract, but Straus asserted that American efforts were premature and companies could not compete in a region traditionally dominated by the Europeans.<sup>169</sup>

The other most important American move for investment in the region was the Chester project which envisioned the building of a railroad in the Turkish Empire that extended from central Anatolia to the Persian borders. Other branch lines were also planned to link the main line to the Black sea and the Mediterranean. The project was estimated to cover 2000 km of railroad lines and cost around \$100 million. The Chester syndicate was not the only American company applying for this project as J.G. White and Company and Anglo-American firm applied for the same concession, but were ultimately defeated in the summer of 1909 by the more favorable offers of the Chester syndicate.<sup>170</sup> In an attempt to improve its prospects of winning the concession, the Chester syndicate got reorganized under the name of the Ottoman-American Development Company and made requests for official support from the State Department. Although officials in Washington made no official commitment to press for granting the concession to the company, they did assure their Turkish counterpart of the company's financial solidity and standing. As a gesture to prove its commitment to such project, the company deposited \$20000 in a bank in Constantinople.<sup>171</sup> The company's bid for the concession was faced with the constant procrastination of the Grand Vizier to hand in the application to the Council of Ministers. Such obstacle was believed to be the outcome of the European powers' influence and opposition, especially from the part of Germany. The latter, despite the denial of Turkish officials, was afraid of American competition with the Baghdad

---

<sup>169</sup> Naomi W. Cohen, "Ambassador Straus in Turkey, 1909-1910: A Note on Dollar Diplomacy", *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45, no. 4 (March 1959)

<sup>170</sup> John A. DeNovo, "A Railroad for Turkey: The Chester Project, 1908-1913", *The Business History Review* 33, no. 3 (Autumn, 1959): 305.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, 309.

railroad line under construction and skeptical that the Chester group is but an arm of the Standard Oil Trust and their plans to control oil investments in the Turkish Empire.<sup>172</sup>

US ambassador to Turkey Oscar Straus made clear to the State Department the extent of the European powers' influence on Turkish politics. He argued that Turkey "is dependent upon the cultivation of good relations with the six great Powers" to ensure its survival as an empire and that if one of them opposed American efforts to win the concession, it would be a great obstacle to granting the concession to an American company despite America's position as a neutral power.<sup>173</sup> In another message to Secretary of State Knox, Straus doubted the practicality of the US open door policy in the Near East. He explained that the economic and political interests of the European powers were intricately inextricable and were far greater than American interests in the region. Thus, American influence was not on par with the Europeans' and State Department's enthusiasm for greater American economic presence in the region would only lead to "unfortunate international entanglements, which will be far more serious than the little advantage that may be derived in a commercial way"<sup>174</sup>

The pressure exerted by Germany and other European powers to delay the Turkish parliament's discussion of granting the concession to Americans aborted the Chester group efforts to win the contract altogether. Such failure, coupled with the rift among decision makers in the company and the start of the Italo-Turkish war in September 1911 convinced the new administration of Woodrow Wilson of the futility of the US efforts to compete with the European powers for commercial and investment opportunities. In an interdepartmental memorandum, the new chief of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs John Van MacMurray explained the political risks of US commercial involvement in the Near East and the position of the Wilson administration:

"the obtaining of this concession - which, though purporting and purposing to be purely commercial in character, could not be divested of political bearings - would result in no real and permanent national advantage to this country, but would, on the other hand, entail upon this Government the liability to very serious obligations which might involve us in the international politics of Europe and the Near East, which we have always been solicitous to avoid."<sup>175</sup>

---

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 310-311.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 312

<sup>174</sup> Cohen, *Ambassador Straus*, 638.

<sup>175</sup> JDeNovo, *A Railroad for Turkey*, 327.

### 3- Wilson and Balfour Declaration

Despite the new direction of US foreign policy after the First World War, the Middle East remained a traditional European sphere of influence. Even after the United States abandoned its neutrality and entered the war on the side of the Allies, it did not declare war on Turkey. While the French and the British carved up the Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence and control through the newly created League of Nations and the mandate system, the United States, with strong opposition of Congress, declined to take part in the organization or assume a mandatory responsibility in the region.

Although the United States joined the Allies and declared war against Germany and Austria-Hungary, it maintained its neutral policy towards Turkey. President Wilson opposed proposals of adopting penal measures against the Turks in the United States. One of the primary factors behind Wilson's stance was his concern about the safety of US missionary activities in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>176</sup> Cleveland Dodge, an American industrialist with philanthropic interests in the Near East and a close friend to Wilson, had marked influence on Wilson's decision. Dodge explained to Wilson that a war with Turkey would impede US missionary and philanthropic efforts in the region and endanger the lives of thousands of Americans.<sup>177</sup>

When the British government requested Wilson's opinion on the declaration of sympathy with the Zionist movement and its objective of creating a national home for the Jews in Palestine on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1917, he contended that the time was not ripe for such official support and that American interests in the Turkish Empire would be at stake.<sup>178</sup> Although Wilson approved the second cable sent by the British government on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917, which endorsed what was to be known as the Balfour Declaration, he requested his endorsement not to be made public, for the same reason of not offending the Turks. However, historians differ on why Wilson did not approve the first statement of support to Zionism made by the British and approved the second. As Richard Lebow argues, the first cable was merely a feeler which was neither official nor urgent, while the second was official and made

---

<sup>176</sup>Frank W. Brecher, "Woodrow Wilson and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict". *American Jewish Archives* 39,no. 1(1993): 23–47.

<sup>177</sup> Joseph L. Grabill, "Cleveland H. Dodge, Woodrow Wilson, and the Near East," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1970), pp.249-264

<sup>178</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, "Woodrow Wilson and the Balfour Declaration," *The Journal of Modern History* 40, no. 4 (December 1968): 522.

it clear that if the Allies would not endorse the Zionist cause to attract Jewish public support, Germany and its allies would certainly do.<sup>179</sup>

Zionist officials close to the President along with Wilson's religious beliefs and missionary diplomacy did play a part in his endorsement of the Zionist cause. Scholars like Selig Adler and Leonard Stein argue that the Zionist movement in the United States, especially the prominent lawyer and member of the Supreme Court Louis Brandeis, did much to change the president's mind to support the Zionist agenda. The idea that a Jewish state in Palestine would remove at once the Turkish tyranny in the region, gather the persecuted Jews around the world in what is believed to be their national home went hand in hand with Wilson's Christian belief and appealed to his sense of mission.<sup>180</sup>

President Wilson did not approve the British statement of support without opposition from his inner circle, especially his adviser Colonel House and his Secretary of State Robert Lansing. Colonel House advised that endorsing such a statement entailed many dangers and he later, after Wilson voiced his support for the statement, argued that the British were doing this for their own national interests, which was to block the road to Egypt and India and to preserve their interests in the region.<sup>181</sup> Likewise, Lansing argued that the US was not at war with Turkey and such move would be a violation of its territory. He added that the Jews themselves were not united on the objective of creating a home in Palestine and that the Christians would be offended if the Holy Land was to be given to the people responsible for the death of Christ.<sup>182</sup>

On August 31<sup>st</sup> 1918 President Wilson publish another letter expressing official endorsement of the Zionist plan which intensified Arab and Christian opposition to US policy in Palestine. The Arabs in the region, especially from Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, united with the Protestant missionaries and formed an alliance to resist Zionism and worked to voice their opposition to the White House. Washington support for the Zionist plan in Palestine, they argued, would directly threaten their plan for the creation of a united greater Syria.<sup>183</sup> In some

---

<sup>179</sup> Ibid,523.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 521.

<sup>181</sup> Selig Adler, "The Palestine Question in the Wilson Era", *Jewish Social Studies* 10, no. 4 (October1948): 305-306.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 307

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 317.

states in the US Arabs lobbied for the same opposition cause and started rallying support for the creation of a united Syria and the abortion of the Zionist plan.<sup>184</sup>

With mounting Arab and missionaries' pressure, and following the advice of the president of the Syrian Protestant College Dr. Howard Bliss, President Wilson agreed on sending a commission to the region to investigate the views of the local population on their future. In its first dispatch to the president, the King-Crane Commission concluded that it would be impossible to implement the Zionist plan in Palestine without the support of a large army. In another dispatch, the commission pressed fervently for the missionaries' vision of a unified Syria that included Palestine.<sup>185</sup>

With the insistence of Cleveland Dodge and the leading missionary in the Near East James Barton, Wilson agreed to send another commission, known as the Harbord Commission, to study the possibility of an American mandate on Asia Minor, the Caucasus and Armenia. The commission report was favorable to the idea of the mandate, but President Wilson found it improper to put before Congress such a proposal while he was working for the ratification of the Versailles Treaty. He also expressed reservation about sending American troops to the region without inciting a public opinion skeptical of foreign interventions.<sup>186</sup>

In September 1919, President Wilson collapsed as a result of physical and mental strain and did not read either reports, and the two inquiries did little to change the US course of action towards the Near East. In March 1920 the Senate rejected the Versailles Treaty and in May 1920 the Senate Foreign Relations Committee gave negative response on the proposal of the Armenian mandate.<sup>187</sup> Such outcome is revealing that the United States, despite its immense contribution in the war efforts, was not yet ready to be fully invested in the politics of the Middle East.

#### **4- Middle Eastern Oil, American Diplomacy and the National Interest**

The First World War and the interwar years proved decisive in changing the nature of American interests in the Middle East and the policies devised to promote and protect them. The discovery of oil became the driving force behind America's growing economic and political involvement in the region. American oil companies were instrumental in promoting American interests and would therefore engage in an informal partnership with the State

---

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 322.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>186</sup> Grabill, *Cleveland H. Dodge*, 260.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. , p261.

Department to promote and protect such interests. Time and again the US faced the European and especially British resistance to its repeated attempts to secure a stake in Middle Eastern oil, but such resistance proved weak in the face of America's growing economic and political influence in the region.

#### **4-1 Oil as the Strategic Asset of the New Century**

The critical role of oil in driving the war machinery of the belligerents during the Great War spurred great powers to compete aggressively for its acquisition in the post-war years.<sup>188</sup> American companies, with strong support from the government, were looking for new oil supplies to avoid the wartime shortage experienced at home and to make up for what was believed to be a depletion of domestic reserves in the foreseeable future. Such estimates of declining domestic reserves were fueled by the rapid increase in demand. The widespread and growing use of automobiles by average Americans was an example of how indispensable this resource became to twentieth century American lifestyle.<sup>189</sup>

The rise in American oil consumption was remarkable during the war and in the 1920s, with an increase of 90% between 1911 and 1918. From 1914 to 1920 car ownership jumped from 1.8 to 9.2 million which was also accompanied by an increase in oil prices. Between 1918 and 1920 prices rose by 50% from two to three dollars a barrel. This increase in oil consumption and prices along with expert assessment of depletion in domestic reserves alarmed international oilmen and politicians alike and spurred official Washington to compete for oil concessions in Middle Eastern.<sup>190</sup>

By the end of the 1920s new oil reserves were discovered in California, Oklahoma and Texas and domestic production surpassed demand. By 1940 American oil production represented two thirds of the global output. New technologies allowed American companies to have more control over overseas reserves, especially in the Caribbean and Latin America. This abundance and high production gave the US and its allies a competitive edge over Germany and Japan during the war and contributed massively in their victory. Once more, the role of oil during the war would dictate US foreign policy in the Cold War to take hold of as much foreign reserves as possible.<sup>191</sup> In this regard, the Middle East figured prominently in US

---

<sup>188</sup>DeNovo, "American Interests and Policies, 168.

<sup>189</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 194.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>191</sup> David S. Painter, "Oil and the American Century," *The Journal of American History*99, no. 1,(June2012)

foreign policy not only to protect and promote oil investments, but also to make use of such asset to win the war against Communism.

#### **4-2 The Turkish Petroleum Company**

The Anglo-American dispute on the right of exploring oil possibilities in the region was compounded by an Anglo-French agreement in San Remo in 1920 which gave France the right of oil exploration in Mesopotamia in exchange for allowing Britain to build an oil pipeline on lands under the French mandate. The American ambassador in Paris viewed such action as an attempt not only to bridge the Anglo-French divide, but also to exclude Americans from oil of the region. When this secret agreement went public, American concerns proved right.<sup>192</sup>

In a note to the British authorities, the State Department argued that British discriminatory policies were a breach of the principle of equal opportunity and on the nature of the mandate system to which the United States was a signatory. The British Foreign Secretary George Curzon contended that the United States wanted to reap the economic benefits without assuming the burden of administration since it did not join the Leagues of Nations. Moreover, he cited similar American discriminatory policies against British interests in the Caribbean and Latin America.<sup>193</sup>

After a long exchange of notes and the State Department's protest against what it saw as a violation of the open door policy and equal opportunity principle, the British began to acquiesce to American demands. Such change in attitude was the result of an array of considerations. British officials were concerned about mounting anti-British sentiment not only among the American public, but also in Congress which contemplated the option of cutting off oil shipment to any country that discriminated against American interests overseas.<sup>194</sup> Moreover, preserving and promoting Anglo-American relationship was high in the agenda of British policy makers and continued discriminatory actions against American interests would only jeopardize such relationship. American participation would also speed up the process of developing the region's oil resources and thus generating revenues for local governments to lighten the burden on British financial support. American political leverage

---

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>194</sup> Yergin, *The Prize*, 196.



was also needed to face any possible obstacles that might arise in a region experiencing political and economic transformation.<sup>195</sup>

American secretary of commerce and secretary of state informed companies wishing to invest in Middle Eastern oil that the government could not support one company at the expense of the other and advised that they work in unison to receive official support. Following this recommendation, seven companies grouped together and formed a syndicate to take part in oil explorations in Mesopotamia. Walter Teagle, president of Standard Oil of New Jersey, became the official spokesperson of the group and in July 1922 he headed to London negotiating on behalf of the group for oil concessions.<sup>196</sup>

The competing parties sought control of the Turkish Petroleum Company which was owned jointly by the Dutch, the British and an Armenian businessman and was created to exploit oil possibilities in the pre-war years.<sup>197</sup> After years of laborious negotiations and after revising a draft agreement, the interested parties agreed on July 31st, 1928 on an equitable share of 23.75 percent for each company including the American group, the British Anglo-Persian, Royal-Dutch Shell and the Compagnie Francaise des Petroles. To start its operation within the Turkish Petroleum Company, the American group was renamed the Near East Development Corporation.<sup>198</sup>

The companies in the Turkish Petroleum Company, which would later be named the Iraqi Petroleum Company, came to an agreement that no company would work alone on any concession in an area drawn by a red line and which cover all the old Turkish Empire. The first oil discovery in the region was in Kirkuk in October 1927.<sup>199</sup> At last, American companies could secure a stake in Middle Eastern oil on a par with the Europeans. But American oil saga would not stop in the red line area or with the companies involved in the Iraqi petroleum company, but would continue with other companies like Standard Oil of California and Places ranging from Bahrain, to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

#### **4-3 Bahrain and Kuwait**

Bahrain and Kuwait were other areas where American companies and the State Department would face yet another obstacle of British influence and domination. In two treaties in 1880

---

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>198</sup> DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies*, 197-198.

<sup>199</sup> Yergin, *The Prize*, 205.

and 1892, Britain brought Bahrain under its protection with the latter's commitment not to negotiate any oil concession with a foreign power without British consent.<sup>200</sup> In 1899, the British signed a protection treaty with Kuwait by which the leader of the latter promised not to accept representatives of foreign nations, engage in the sale or lease of property, or conduct foreign policy without prior consent of British officials.<sup>201</sup>

American access to oil exploration in Bahrain was achieved through Frank Holmes, a mining engineer from New Zealand who was awarded an oil concession for extracting water for the king of Bahrain. Holmes set up a company, Eastern and General Syndicate, but failed to solicit British funding for his oil explorations. He later turned to Americans for financial support which culminated in a formal business partnership.<sup>202</sup> Gulf oil initially accepted to work with Holmes but was bounded by the Red Line agreement with the Turkish Petroleum Company. Gulf presented the opportunity to Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) which accepted to work with Holmes. While SOCAL was not part of the TPC and was therefore not bound by the red line agreement, it still faced the British condition of the "nationality clause" which disqualifies any company that is not British registered or whose management are not British from any oil concessions in Bahrain.<sup>203</sup>

As American diplomatic pressure was mounting and as the British recognized the benefits of the flow of American capital and investment, they finally agreed to allow SOCAL to operate in Bahrain. The British made sure that their political influence would be maintained on Bahrain and so they set the condition that all communications between Socal and the Sheikh would go through the British political agent in the region. To evade the "nationality clause" SOCAL created a subsidiary registered in Canada, named later the Bahrain Petroleum Company, which started oil explorations in October 1931.<sup>204</sup>

Britain exercised far greater influence and control on Kuwait than it did on Bahrain. Apart from the formal treaty signed in 1899, Kuwait desperately needed British protection to have an edge on its border dispute with its neighbor Saudi Arabia. Also, Kuwait had a political agent in place who served as a political adviser for the Sheik on matters of foreign policy.

---

<sup>200</sup>DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies*, 203.

<sup>201</sup> Fiona Venn, *A Struggle for Supremacy: Great Britain, the United States, and Kuwait Oil in the 1930s* (Essex: University of Essex, 2012), 4.

<sup>202</sup>Yergin, *The Prize*, 281-282.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 282.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 283.

Therefore, any attempt on his part to grant oil concessions to non-British companies would be met with scrutiny and resistance.<sup>205</sup>

As it was the case with Bahrain, the British had to finally yield to American diplomatic pressure and allow American companies a stake in Kuwait's oil. The British change of mind came as a result of a variety of international and domestic factors. Britain's debts to the United States were due to be negotiated in 1932 and Britain was no longer receiving the money it owed to Germany or its allies. Other matters related to tariffs, trade and the tensions arising in the Far East necessitated further Anglo-American cooperation and spurred Britain to make concessions.<sup>206</sup> The Colonial Office and the Government of India were of the view that American investment in Kuwait would do more good than harm. The Sheik of Kuwait was running in financial troubles and was a burden on the British treasury. American capital therefore would contribute to the economic development of the Sheikdom and relieve some of its financial difficulties. The result was an official declaration by the British Foreign Secretary in April 1932 that his government was no longer resistant to granting oil concessions to non-British companies.<sup>207</sup>

The American company Gulf Oil could finally had access to Kuwait's oil in agreement with the British Anglo-Persian. Because the Sheikh of Kuwait was raising the bargain high for granting an oil concession through playing one company against the other, the two companies joined forces and created the Kuwait Oil Company to bid for the concession. Despite the fifty-fifty agreement, the British continued to have the upper hand as the Foreign Office maintained that the operations had to be controlled by the British. After another year of negotiations with the Sheikh, he agreed to grant the newly created a company the right of oil exploration for a period of seventy five years.<sup>208</sup>

#### **4-5 Saudi Arabia**

Nowhere were American efforts to stake out a share in Middle Eastern oil less obstructed by the British domination than in the newly founded kingdom of Saudi Arabia. King Ibn Saud's financial troubles due to the decline of pilgrims to the holy places spurred him to think of other sources of revenue, and exploring mineral resources was one option. The American mining engineer Karl Twitchell was instrumental in promoting the kingdom for American oil

---

<sup>205</sup> Venn, *Struggle for Supremacy*, 7.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 10-13.

<sup>208</sup> Yergin, *The Prize*, 297.

companies to embark on oil exploration. When he contacted SOCAL to discuss the offer, the company was eager to add another concession to the one recently won in Bahrain.<sup>209</sup>

When SOCAL started the negotiations with the King's finance minister, the Iraqi Petroleum Company joined the competition for an oil concession. This latter, represented by Anglo-Persian, wanted to bid for the concession with hope to achieve oil monopoly. IPC's offer was far less inferior to that offered by SOCAL. As IPC abandoned the competition, SOCAL and Ibn Saud came to an agreement in May 1933 for an oil concession that covered 360000 square miles in exchange for \$175000.

Arguments on why the concession was given to SOCAL and not to its competitor IPC varied widely. The British interpretation contends that SOCAL's much superior financial offer compared to that of IPC was irresistible. American critics believe that King Ibn Saud was loathe of British control in the region and was afraid that such concession would only increase their domination. Others claim that British support of Ibn Saud's rivals in the region, the Hashemite dynasty, was decisive in turning down the British offer.<sup>210</sup>

In the same year SOCAL created the California Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC), a subsidiary responsible for oil operations in Saudi Arabia. To speed up its oil exploration, the other American company Texas was invited to join this venture on a fifty-fifty basis. After years of unpromising efforts, the company first discovered oil in Damam in commercial quantities in 1938.<sup>211</sup> The company was later renamed the Arabian American Standard Oil Company (Aramco) which continues to hold considerable sway over oil production and marketing in Saudi Arabia.

Such American economic involvement would inevitably induce political commitments during the Second World War. Despite continuous insistence from SOCAL, the Roosevelt administration did not welcome the idea of creating a diplomatic mission in the country to represent American interests. In 1939, the American minister to Egypt was tasked with the job and in 1942 the wartime administration created a permanent legation in Saudi Arabia.<sup>212</sup> During the Second World War, the protection of oilfields from attacks or control by the Axis powers was one concern of British military leaders and politicians alike. As the Saudi king continued to be neutral and as he refused to host any British troops on his land or even British

---

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>210</sup> DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies*, 207.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 207-208.

<sup>212</sup> Yergin, *The Prize*, 292.

personnel to join CASOC for “oil-denial” programs, the British worked to secure US military help to assume such responsibility. US officials, and the war department in particular, continued to resist any military involvement or responsibility in Saudi Arabia. Thus, such oil-denial operations became the full responsibility of the American oil company.<sup>213</sup>

Such resistance to military presence did not exclude other economic and diplomatic involvement to protect and maintain American interests in Saudi Arabia. The war disrupted two main sources of the kingdom’s revenues, money brought by pilgrims to Mecca and royalties paid by CASOC because of decline in oil production and revenues. It was in this context that the company turned to the US government to provide economic and financial help which became, in the views of company officials, inextricably connected with the stability of the region and therefore the security of American business interests.<sup>214</sup>

Such request of financial aid took place against a backdrop of mounting Anglo-American wartime competition to increase their economic presence and financial profits in the kingdom. As CASOC played on the theme of the security of the region to secure such financial support, the king also played the Americans against the British to receive as much aid as possible. After some resistance on the part of the Roosevelt administration, the president finally agreed to devote \$10 million to Saudi Arabia out of the \$ 425 million directed to Britain in the form of a lend lease aid in 1941 and 1942.<sup>215</sup>In an attempt to counterweight British influence and assert theirs, CASOC officials pressed hard again for further aid to the kingdom. In February 1943 President Roosevelt agreed to include Saudi Arabia as one of the beneficiaries from the Lend Lease program. In the coming two years, the United States provided\$ 18 millions of aid to Saudi Arabia as its share in a joint Anglo-American aid program.<sup>216</sup>

By the war’s end, the US also increased its diplomatic presence to attend to its intensifying economic interests. Colonel William Eddy, the CIA agent who worked as a consultant to ARAMCO in Saudi Arabia, became the new American ambassador in Jidda. A new consulate was opened in Dhahran and an agriculture mission was created to grow food especially for the ruling class’ palaces. In El Ahsaa region, the US built a major oil refinery that attracted

---

<sup>213</sup> Daniel Silverfarb, “Britain, the United States, and the Security of the Saudi Arabian Oilfields in 1942” *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 3 (September 1983)

<sup>214</sup>Robert Vitalis, “Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf” *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 196-197

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 198-199

thousands of American engineers and technicians. A military base was constructed in Dahrhan and several American companies were contacted to manage the kingdom's airlines and system of communications.<sup>217</sup>

It is worth noting the debate surrounding Aramco's claims that its investments and commercial activities benefited not only the company and the United States, but also the local population. The company and its officials prided themselves on bringing modernization and advancement to the local population while at the same time resisting old colonialism exercised by the British and other Europeans. The company also prided itself on the development of education, housing and health care in El Ahsasa and the construction of a web of roads, hospitals and other services and industries.<sup>218</sup> The company continued to link this narrative with the stability of the country to press for more support from official Washington.

Such image of benevolence has also a dark side that the company often overlooked in its narratives. The company's presence and activities in the region were tarnished by beliefs "of white supremacy, norms of discrimination, and segregation and, at its margins, of paternalist racial uplift." The company imported the same system of segregation applied in Columbia and Venezuela where Americans lived in far better conditions than those provided to the local labor force. Such conditions along with low wages for the local workers led to a series of strikes that were muted by force and intimidation.<sup>219</sup>

### **5- Oil and the National Interest: A Growing Official and Corporate Partnership**

The Second World War did much to change official perception of American oil businesses in the Middle which helped shape the direction of American foreign policy in the region. Oil as a critical variable in winning the two wars made it strongly connected to the stability of the region, to winning the Cold War against Communism, and to the national security of the United States. This helped strengthened the public-private partnership between the government and the oil industry to advance what both saw as interests of mutual concern. Thus, the government embarked on a number of measures to bring the oil industry under its control or, when unsuccessful, help its expansion and then use it as a means to achieve political ends.

---

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 194

<sup>218</sup> Thomas Lippman, *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (USA: Westview Press, 2004), 19-20

<sup>219</sup> Vitalis, *Black Gold*, 200-201.

The need for foreign oil in general and that of the Middle East in particular was promoted by Everette DeGolyer, the director of conservation in the Office of the Coordinator for National Defense from 1941 to 1942. DeGolyer advanced the claim that despite the newly found domestic reserves, which he also argued were exaggerated, the United States would be a net oil importer in the foreseeable future. DeGolyer believed that the center of global oil production was moving from the Caribbean and the US to the Middle East, while he criticized the protectionist policies promoted by local producers and the “propaganda of plenty” that domestic production would meet postwar demand.<sup>220</sup>

To bring such strategic asset in the Middle East under government control, the Roosevelt administration took several measures that were eventually aborted thanks to the lobbying of domestic oil producers. Harold Ickes, the head of the newly created Petroleum Administration for War (PAW), suggested to SOCAL and Texaco to buy Aramco, their oil subsidiary in Saudi Arabia. The two companies turned down the offer as uninteresting. Ickes also suggested to the British to sell their 50 percent share in the Kuwait Oil Company in exchange for Lend-Lease aid, an offer that was also rejected by the British.<sup>221</sup> In a more ambitious move, the State Department, after tedious negotiations, came to an agreement with the British. Such agreement recognized the latter’s political primacy and influence over the Middle East and enshrined the application of “equal opportunity” principle on US companies when investing in the oil of the region. Confronted with congressional opposition and accusations of creating an oil cartel that would bankrupt domestic producers and affect the American average consumer, the agreement was eventually abandoned by the Truman administration.<sup>222</sup>

Employing oil as an instrument to winning the Cold War further cemented cooperation between the government and the oil industry. In many occasions when criticized or sued for practices of monopoly, overseas producers often made use of Cold War arguments of national security and eventually succeeded to receive government protection. Such companies claimed that their businesses transcended mere material benefits and were closely connected with American Cold War political agenda. The post-war European recovery undertaken under the auspices of the Marshal plan would be impossible without b Middle Eastern crude oil. Also,

---

<sup>220</sup> Nathan J. Citino, “Internationalist Oilmen, the Middle East, and the Remaking of American Liberalism, 1945-1953” *The Business History Review* 84, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 232-233.

<sup>221</sup> Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 49.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*, 50-51.

stability of key states in the Middle East critically depended on oil revenues which made resisting and fending off communist expansion possible.<sup>223</sup>

The State Department helped first in abolishing the ‘red line’ Agreement which restricted independent investment by American companies taking part in the Iraqi consortium. While the British accepted to revoke such agreement, French and Armenian oilman resisted. American diplomats protested that such agreement or any other that might limit competition would go against American foreign policy principles of the “open door” and “equal opportunity”. After a legal dispute the agreement was abolished in 1948 and enabled Jersey Standard and SOCONY to join forces with SOCAL and Texaco in Saudi Arabia through their subsidiary Aramco.<sup>224</sup>

In another occasion, the State Department helped Aramco construct a huge oil pipeline, Trans Arabic Pipeline (TAPLINE), of more than one thousand miles that crossed four Middle East states from Dhahran to Seddon in Lebanon and cost more than \$200 million. The project was first adopted by the Petroleum Administration for War, but congressional and domestic opposition threw it to private hands. The project promised a range of benefits for Aramco, the Middle East, and the American government. Apart from generating profits and reducing transportation costs, the project provided Western Europe with cheap oil for its post-war economic recovery, increased the royalties for the Saudi government and revenues of transit fees for Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and helped promote regional stability.<sup>225</sup>

The Truman administration’s support to bring such project to life was indispensable. It first pressured the British to cross the pipeline through Jordan and Palestine and worked closely with its allies in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon to hold public opposition under sway. The CIA on its part helped topple the nationalist regime in Syria and brought a pro-Western general who approved the pipeline crossing the Syrian territory. At home, the Department of State and the Department of Commerce worked hand in hand to facilitate the exportation of much needed steel pipe and the Department of Defense helped sell the project as key to the national security of the United States and its European allies. In December 1950, the pipeline was

---

<sup>223</sup> Douglas Little, “Gideon's Band: America and the Middle East since 1945,” *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 515-516

<sup>224</sup> Douglas Little, *American Orientalism*, 52-53.

<sup>225</sup> Douglas Little, “Pipeline Politics: America, TAPLINE, and the Arabs,” *The Business History Review* 64, no. 2, (Summer 1990): 256-287



completed and started pouring three hundred thousand barrels of Saudi oil per day to Western Europe.<sup>226</sup>

In the context of the Cold War and the narrative of national security, the Truman administration protected US companies active in the Middle East from accusations of breaching anti-monopoly legislations and cleared their way to stake out a share in Iranian oil. This example of cooperation between the government and oil companies was also driven by foreign policy considerations, that such expansion in Iranian oil industry would generate more profits for the companies and at the same time serve the State Department's objective of maintaining Iran's political stability and its position as a pro-Western state.<sup>227</sup>

American economic expansion in Iran took place against the backdrop of Soviet and British declining influence. After the Second World War, the Iranian Parliament thwarted the Soviets' attempts to gain an oil concession and then backed off from an initial agreement to grant them a share of Iranian oil in exchange for Soviet troops' withdrawal. This paved the way for a bolder move by the Iranian government to challenge an old agreement with Anglo-Persian and sought a fifty-fifty share of profits following an example of Saudi Arabia with ARAMCO. With British resistance to acquiesce to the Iranian terms, the new nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq brought Iranian oil under government control, triggering a diplomatic crisis that threatened the stability of Iran and the region.<sup>228</sup>

Convinced that such nationalization would have serious consequences on the British economy and its interests in the region, British officials considered a military action to protect its interests the most viable option. This course of action was opposed by the Truman administration as the West was busy fighting the Cold War on the Korean peninsula and on the ground that instability would invite Soviet intervention and influence in Iran. As a series of negotiations came to naught and as an embargo on Iranian oil did little to bring about change in the Iranian behavior, British and American intelligence orchestrated a coup that brought down Prime Minister Mosaddeq and put back the pro-western Shah in power. Such action did not only prove the practicality of covert operation, but also helped American oil companies stake out a share in Iranian oil once dominated by the British.<sup>229</sup>

---

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. , P 284.

<sup>227</sup> Fiona Venn, *Oil Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*(USA: St Martin's Press, 1986 ), 113.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 114-115.

<sup>229</sup> Alan P. Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century: of Friendship, Conflict and the Rise and Decline of Superpowers* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp 115-116.

In another round of negotiations between London and Tehran, American diplomacy was able to strike an agreement which secured the National Iranian Company the control of oil fields without denying the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and American investors a share in Iranian oil. The deal was crowned by creating an international consortium in which Anglo-Iranian held 40 percent of the shares, a group of five big American companies another 40 percent, while Shell obtained 14 percent and Compagnie Francaise des Petroles 6 percent. Domestic opposition to the American group participating in the consortium was once again aborted by the primacy of national security interests in American politics over legal considerations raised by the Justice Department and the Attorney general.<sup>230</sup>

As British and European influence on the Middle East and its oil continued to wane after the Second World War, the United States, represented by its giant oil companies and the State Department, succeeded to make significant inroads to secure a stake in the region's most valuable asset. Starting by gaining an equal share in the Iraqi Petroleum Company, American oilmen went on to expand in Bahrain and Kuwait facing fierce competition and sometimes opposition from the traditionally dominant British. While Americans faced less competition in Saudi Arabia and could easily secure a historic deal with the newly found kingdom, they were forced to cooperate with their British counterparts in Iran to affect regime change that would protect the latter's economic interests and paved the way for American companies to secure a share of what's left of the Persian oil.

All that American oil companies could attain in the Middle East in the interwar years and after would have been impossible without the official support of the government both at home and abroad. This support became more pressing as oil and the Middle East became inextricably connected with the national security of the US and its war with the Soviet Union. At home, the burgeoning presidency helped protect such companies from antitrust law suits and accusations of monopoly while the State Department strove to end discriminatory policies employed by the British and other Europeans against American interests in the region. As the Middle East and oil were brought to the orbit of American strategic interests, American policy makers would make the protection of the region and its asset the highest priority of their national and foreign policies.

---

<sup>230</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 57-58

## **6- The Middle East and Cold War: Contending with the Soviet Challenge**

The danger of Soviet expansion in the region was not only what haunted American leaders. Arab nationalist regimes and their neutral stance in the Cold War were equally threatening to American interests and to oil-producing states increasingly dependent on the West to shore up their rule. While American officials often linked nationalism to Communism when formulating policies, nationalist leaders like Djamel Abdunnasir continued to claim that it was US anti-communist moves in the region that invited further Soviet meddling.<sup>231</sup> Thus, repelling the Soviet threat, weakening anti-American nationalism and shoring up pro-Western regimes became the essence of American foreign policy during the Cold War.

### **6-1 Truman and the Policy of Containment**

The policy of containment, which remained the backbone of US strategy to confront Communism during the Cold War, was also invoked in many occasions and in different ways throughout the region. From providing financial and military assistance to friendly allies, engaging in covert operations to bring down hostile regimes in Iran and Syria, devising security systems and military alliances like the Baghdad Pact, and at times resorting to direct military interventions as in Lebanon, American leaders were bent to employ an array of instruments short of open war to bring as many states to the Western orbit while denying the Soviet Union more influence and presence in the region.<sup>232</sup>

The Truman Doctrine, an early component and model of the policy of containment, made the stability of Greece and Turkey and their protection from Soviet aggression indispensable to the stability of Europe and the Middle East. In his address to a joint session of Congress on 12 March 1947, Truman asserted that the United States would provide the necessary financial support to Greece and Turkey, an aid that is vital not only to the “modernization” of Turkey and “the maintenance of its national integrity”, but also “essential to the preservation of order in the Middle East.” If Greece would fall under Communist control, the President noted, Turkey would follow suit and “confusion and disorder might well spread throughout the entire Middle East”<sup>233</sup>

---

<sup>231</sup> Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat* 161-162.

<sup>232</sup> Peter L. Hahan, *Historical Dictionary of US-Middle East Relations* (US: Scarecrow Press, 2007)

<sup>233</sup> Harry Truman, "The Truman Doctrine," *Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp)

This speech was a milestone in the foreign policy of the United States because it ushered in two main critical developments. The first is that the Soviet Union was clearly perceived as an enemy and rival of the United States and that confrontation between the two powers and their allies, whether direct or indirect, was taking place in Southeastern Europe and the Middle East. The speech also marked the first time the Middle East was declared by an American president as a region vital to US interests where US control and protection should be consolidated.<sup>234</sup>

The Truman doctrine not only helped provide \$400 million to Greece and Turkey but also initiated the passage of the National Security Act which created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and created the Department of Defense. The Truman administration, moreover, accelerated its partnership with the British government to reach an agreement on sharing the responsibilities of policing the Middle East and help compensate for Britain's waning influence and power.<sup>235</sup>

In a series of meetings between American and British officials in the Pentagon, the two highlighted the strategic importance of Greece and Turkey for the Middle East and agreed that the provision of aid to them is now the full responsibility of the United States. The British on their part expressed their willingness to continue playing their traditional roles in places of major interests like the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal. The two sides also came to the consensus that they would follow "parallel policies" based on future cooperation and support for each other in the region.<sup>236</sup>

## **6-2 Truman and the Support of Zionism: Between Domestic Politics and Cold War Calculations**

In their endeavor to win more friends and allies in the region, the two superpowers made the support of Zionism and the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine a cardinal part of their policies. Historians continue to debate Truman's motives for the support of Jewish immigration from Europe to Palestine, his approval of the UN partition plan along with his recognition of the State of Israel. The President's track of records and decisions on the issue were inconsistent and were "hallmarked by ad hoc, impromptu statements and reversal of policy." His decisions were the product of a range of influences that were oftentimes

---

<sup>234</sup>Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis*, P 41.

<sup>235</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 123-124.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 124.

independent or even against his own preferences.<sup>237</sup> This debate led to the emergence of two schools of thought regarding Truman's motives behind the support of the Zionist cause. On the one hand, the White House school advances the argument that the president's support of Zionists stemmed purely from humanitarian considerations due to the Jewish plight in Europe under Nazi control. The State Department school, however, claims that Truman's decisions were taken on narrow political grounds to win the Jewish vote and their financial support for the Democratic Party at the expense of long-term and strategic interests, namely oil and military bases across the Arab World.<sup>238</sup>

Clark Clifford, one of Truman's White House closest advisers and a major source of influence on his Palestine policy, continued to defend the humanitarian and religious drive behind Truman's support of Zionism. In a lecture to the American Historical Association in 1976 he criticized the State Department for blocking the President from taking decisions "animated by his deeper human instincts" while he contended that Truman "believed in the historical justification for a Jewish Homeland" and that "the Balfour Declaration promise constituted a solemn promise that fulfilled the age-old hope and dream of the Jewish people."<sup>239</sup>

While Clifford vindicated Truman's motivation to help the Jews, he failed to highlight the weight of politics and the Jewish vote that he himself employed to advance his argument with the president. In November 1947 Clifford submitted a memorandum to the president noting the significance the Jewish vote in New York and asserting that no candidate since 1876, except Wilson, won the presidency without winning New York. This memorandum followed a report by the *Zionist Review* which followed the same reasoning, New York alone could make a difference and help Truman win the presidency.<sup>240</sup>

While the same political considerations helped convince the President to approve the UN partition plan, Cold War calculations pressed for by the State Department and the CIA played a part in the reversal of such decision and the proposal of the US delegation in the UN for a trusteeship in Palestine. The State Department school argued that the plan was unworkable, would trigger Arab opposition and endanger US interests in the Arab World, and would

---

<sup>237</sup> Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (California: University of California Press, 1990), 277.

<sup>238</sup> Michael J. Cohen, "Truman and Palestine, 1945-1948: Revisionism, Politics and Diplomacy," *Modern Judaism* 2, no. 1 (February 1982)

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p 4.

<sup>240</sup> Michael J. Cohen, *Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945-1948* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 47-48

above all invite Soviet meddling. State Department officials also believed that the plan could not be implemented without huge international military force of which the Soviets would constitute a considerable part.<sup>241</sup>

Although presenting trusteeship as an alternative to the partition plan was considered a victory for the State Department and its supporters, such triumph proved to be short-lived. The proposition generated sharp criticism from the press, which viewed it as an acquiescence to Arab pressure, and intensified the Jewish lobby to press the Truman administration not only for a return to partition, but for the recognition of a Jewish state in the making. In their venture to delay Truman's recognition of the Jewish state, State Department officials argued that such a move would harm the UN and the president's image and present him as a political opportunist striving to please Jewish voters. Clifford and other White House aides pressed the president to embrace the new state before the Soviet Union did.<sup>242</sup>

While Truman's immediate recognition of the new state was to considerable extent motivated by domestic politics, such factor seemed less pressing than great power conflict and Cold War considerations. While Cold War calculations dictated that the US should win such state on its side in the Cold War struggle, much more was at play in the few months before Truman's recognition. The Jewish armed groups were making military inroads in Palestine and the erection of their state seemed a *fait accompli* in the eyes of the US president and his advisers. As the new state presumably helped fill a political and a military vacuum created by the end of the British mandate, and as this allayed US fears that the Soviets would exploit an unstable situation, Truman seemed to be at last relieved of getting out of an ever complex situation created by both the pressure of domestic politics and international great power competition.<sup>243</sup>

A close look at the various studies on Truman's Palestine policy reveals that his decisions regarding the support of Jewish immigration to Palestine, the awkward support of the UN partition plan and then the proposal of trusteeship as an alternative along with his recognition of the Jewish State were not all motivated by the same considerations. While humanitarian concerns and domestic politics were in play to convince the President to press for the immigration of 100 thousand European Jews to Palestine and to give his approval of the

---

<sup>241</sup> Bruce J. Evensen, "Truman, Palestine and the Cold War", *Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 1 (Jan., 1992), pp. 120-156, P 135.

<sup>242</sup>Ibid, 143.

<sup>243</sup>Cohen, *Truman and Palestine*, 18-19.

partition plan, the reversal to the trusteeship plan and the recognition of the Jewish State were mainly the outcome of Cold War calculations.

### **6-3 The Baghdad Pact: Marshalling Pro-Western Forces**

In the same realm of containing Soviet influence in the Middle East, the Truman administration worked closely with British officials to devise a regional security structure modeled on the newly created NATO to shore up Western influence in the region. The Middle East Command (MEC) was the name given to the first initiative in this course in early 1951 which aimed to enlist Egypt as a leader of a defense system that includes other Arab states. The command also aimed to solve an Anglo-Egyptian dispute on a British military base in the Suez Canal and coordinate Anglo-American marine operations in the region. The program was rebuffed by Egypt and was branded as a new and indirect form of imperialism.<sup>244</sup>

Egypt not only rejected the Anglo-American offer but also ordered the immediate withdrawal of British military stationed in the Suez. This move alarmed US security planners and signaled “the rapidly declining ability of the U.K. to maintain and defend Western interests in parts of the Middle East.” The new Eisenhower administration, in order to avoid triggering anti-imperial Arab sentiment, rebranded the scheme as the Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO). With only Pakistan and Turkey showing interest in such organization and with another outright rejection of the Egyptians, President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles became convinced that only an agreement between local actors without Western participation would withstand local opposition.<sup>245</sup>

Secretary Dulles’ new approach to Middle East defense paid less lip service to British initiative and the US started working on a system based on “the northern tier” concept. The Baghdad Pact was the result of this endeavor which started with Pakistan and Turkey signing an agreement on security cooperation followed later by Iran and Iraq. The first step in the creation of such agreement came with drawing Pakistan into the Middle East to benefit from its large and relatively well-equipped army to assist other pro-western states in case of instability or war. The initial agreement between Pakistan and Turkey came after US promises of military help to the former.<sup>246</sup>

---

<sup>244</sup>Hahan, *Historical Dictionary*, 103.

<sup>245</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 126-128.

<sup>246</sup> Ayesha Jalal, “Towards the Baghdad Pact: South Asia and Middle East Defense in the Cold War, 1947-1955”, *The International History Review* 11, no. 3 (1989): 431

The formal phase of signing the pact started in January 1954 between Turkey and Baghdad. With their declining influence in Iran and Egypt, the British felt compelled to follow the US lead and joined the pact in April 1954 to preserve some of their influence in Iraq after the end of a security agreement with its government. With Pakistan and Iran joining in September and October respectively, representatives of the pact's members held the first of their meetings by the end of the year. Such agreement, apart from serving American objectives of keeping the Soviet Union out of the region and tying in Western security with those of their allies in the Gulf, it also signaled the continuous decline in Britain's ability to police the region.<sup>247</sup>

#### **6-4 The Challenge of Arab Nationalism**

With Britain's military withdrawal from the Suez Canal, the failure of Britain and the US to enlist Egypt in recent regional security initiatives, President Nasser was making the Soviets his source of weapons, struck a deal with them to build an atomic reactor and strengthened economic ties with Communist China. Dulles started what he termed the Omega initiative which aimed to thwart Soviet-Egyptian rapprochement and growing partnership<sup>248</sup> The instruments that Dulles suggested to carry out the Omega initiative, which was officially approved by the State and Defense departments on 28 March 1956, ranged from withdrawing promises of financial aid, especially the one to construct the Aswan dam, triggering nationalist propaganda against Nasser from his rival in Iraq, and expanding the Baghdad pact to other countries in the region. Nasser's rejection to accept the Anglo-American assistance on their terms to build the Aswan dam, his conclusion of an arms deal with Poland along with his recognition of Communist China outraged US officials who started reconsidering their aid to build the dam.<sup>249</sup>

Though Nasser's neutralist stance and the failure of the aid to achieve its goal to deflect the Egyptian leader from Soviet influence were major factors that led eventually to cancelling the aid offer, other domestic and international influences were also at play. At home, the pro-Israeli lobby was resentful of providing aid to strengthen a regime hostile to Israel and its interests. Congressmen of some southern states warned that building the Aswan dam would help flourish Egyptian cotton production and would therefore threaten the domestic industry.

---

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 431-432.

<sup>248</sup> Secretary of State John Foster Dulles quoted in Peter L. Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the early Cold War*(USA: the University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 200.

<sup>249</sup>Ibid, 2002.



Internationally, France complained that the US move went against its interests in Algeria where Nasser was backing a revolutionary war for independence. Other regional allies protested that Egypt's neutral and sometimes hostile policies were paying off more than their friendship with the United States.<sup>250</sup>

Secretary Dulles' decision to let the aid offer wither using delaying tactics and then withdrawing it altogether came even after the Soviets offered their support to Egypt as an alternative to US help. This did not seem to alarm US officials as the National Security Agency concluded that such move would burden the Soviet treasury and can be used as Cold War propaganda against Egypt. Three days after the US officially withdrew its offer to build the dam, the Egyptian president announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal.<sup>251</sup> Western efforts to win or deter the Egyptian leader backfired as he became the hero of the Arab world and as he got ever closer to the Soviet Union. Although American interests were not directly threatened, the nationalization compromised oil shipment to Western Europe. Outraged by Nasser's action, Britain, France and Israel launched a military operation against Egypt on 26 October 1956.<sup>252</sup>

While the three aggressors were motivated by the Egyptian threat to their material interests, American fierce opposition to their action was driven by strategic calculations. White House officials warned the military action would distract world opinion from Soviet moves in Eastern Europe and would alienate Arab public opinion and draw their leaders further to the Soviet camp. Americans adopted both diplomatic and economic measures to put an end to the attack. They first backed a UN resolution to condemn the action, cut off oil supplies from the Western Hemisphere to France and Britain, and blocked their Anglo-Saxon partners' efforts to receive financial aid to back up the pound.<sup>253</sup>

Although the American response to the triple attack triggered a favorable image of the United States, it simultaneously weakened western position in the region. Britain was the first to suffer as its image and prestige was dealt a shattering blow and its influence remarkably waned. Nasser's and Arab nationalists' stance was strengthened and the Soviets were the susceptible to exploit such event to gain influence and sympathy in the region. Britain's

---

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 204-206.

<sup>252</sup> Paterson, *Meeting the Communist*, 173-174.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 175-176.

retreat and waning influence after the Suez crisis spurred President Eisenhower to devise a doctrine of his own.<sup>254</sup>

In a White House meeting with congressional leaders Eisenhower noted that the United States “cannot leave a vacuum in the Middle East and assume that Russia stay out,” expressing the need to press for more economic aid and an authorization to use force if needs be to protect American interests in the region.<sup>255</sup> In a hearing session of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Secretary Dulles reiterated the President’s concerns and policy. He contended that the region would come under Soviet control unless the US assumed bigger responsibility in light of “the collapse of British influence in the area.” While the economic component of Eisenhower’s new policy in the region would help “build up the economies of the free countries there,” the use of force would repel Soviet aggression against American allies.<sup>256</sup>

In his address to a joint a session of Congress on 5 January 1957, President Eisenhower laid down his new Middle East policy that came to be known the Eisenhower doctrine. The President highlighted the strategic importance of the region and the instability recently ensued by his allies which was “manipulated by international Communism.” To ensure the integrity of the region and the independence of its nations the President requested not only the provision of economic assistance but also the “the employment of the armed forces of the United States to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations ..... against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism”.<sup>257</sup>

In a first attempt to put the economic facet of the doctrine into practice, the Eisenhower administration aimed to shore up relations with Saudi Arabia to counterweight the nationalist Egyptian leader. Arriving on 29 January 1957 to a summit with the US president, the Saudi king had more to negotiate with his American counterpart than economic and military assistance. While Eisenhower emphasized the communist threat posed both by the Soviets and nationalist regimes in Egypt and Syria, the Saudi leader expressed his belief that these countries were by no means controlled by the Soviets while he urged the Israeli withdrawal

---

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>255</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 132.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid

<sup>257</sup> Dwight Eisenhower, “Eisenhower Doctrine, 5 January 1957” *Miller Center*, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-5-1957-eisenhower-doctrine>

from Gaza and Sinai.<sup>258</sup> Despite such differences, the two sides reached a deal by which the United States would provide \$50 million of military aid. Such aid was to be allocated to military training and the completion of logistical construction of military base in Dhahran. In exchange, the Americans secured the renewal of using such base for the next five years. This summit was also a starting point for an American strategy to use Islam as shield against Communist ideology in the region.<sup>259</sup>

Lebanon was a testing ground for the military facet of the new doctrine. When the Lebanese president Bashar Choury was ousted by a military coup in 1952, the State Department welcomed the new pro-western president Camille Chamoun who later declared that in case of war with the Soviet Union, “Lebanon would be 100 percent on the side of the West, our harbors would be open to your ships, our airfields to your planes.”<sup>260</sup> In May 1958 Chamoun triggered public protests against what was believed to be his unconstitutional actions. Chamoun was also notorious for receiving CIA money to finance his campaign and win what was seen by his opponents rigged elections. When violence erupted, Chamoun was quick to depict the protests as driven by international Communism and Arab nationalism, appealing to American intervention to quell the protests.<sup>261</sup>

With American credibility at stake to save the Lebanon president, the rule of the Hashemite was under siege from nationalist military officers. This led pro-western leaders in Pakistan, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia to press American officials to intervene to quell what they saw a surging trend of Arab nationalism. Convinced that the drawbacks of inaction outweighed that of intervention, Anglo-American officials agreed on a limited intervention to avoid an all-out confrontation with the Soviet Union. On 15 July 1958 operation Blue Bat was launched by sending the Sixth fleet to the eastern Mediterranean and landing seventeen hundred US marines on the Lebanese shores. While the operation was praised by the Eisenhower administration as clean and effective, its long-term consequences were yet to unfold.<sup>262</sup>

By the summer of 1957, American officials considered Syria as moving into the Soviet orbit and becoming its satellite in the area. A \$500 million grain-for-arms deal with the Soviets,

---

<sup>258</sup> Nathan J. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Saud and the Making of US-Saudi Relationship*(USA: Indiana University Press, 2002),123.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 125-126.

<sup>260</sup> Douglas Little, “His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis”, *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 1 (Winter1996): 34

<sup>261</sup> Paterson, *Meeting the Communist*, 186.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, 43-46.

the building of an oil refinery by the Czech in Homs, and Syria's strengthened ties with Egypt convinced the Eisenhower administration to launch the covert action Operation Wappen. Penetrated by Syria's counterintelligence, the operation was quickly aborted, a group of CIA agents were expelled, and US embassy was put under surveillance. Although anti-American forces in Syria tightened their grip on power, US officials never invoked the Eisenhower doctrine mainly because of the lukewarm support of America's regional allies and the fear that an intervention would escalate into a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union.<sup>263</sup>

## **7- The US and Israel: Consolidating a Strategic Alliance**

Apart from maintaining the flow of oil from the Middle East to the Western World, the attendance to the security of its producers and the containment of Soviet expansion, the survival and protection of the new state of Israel became a backbone of American Middle East policy. What was to be termed a special relationship between the US and Israel has been founded on a range of cultural and political aspects. Domestic politics, like the Jewish vote and lobby personified in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its influence on congress, has also played a vital role in translating this relationship into a formal alliance.<sup>264</sup>

Moreover, the view of Israel as an asset or a liability for the US in the region developed into two distinct schools of thought, the globalists and the regionalists. For globalists, who advocate an "Israel first" policy, the Jewish state stands as an advanced and a trustworthy ally that should be militarily and financially assisted to keep ahead of its adversaries in the region. This would enable it to function as guardian of American interests in the region against hostile nationalist regimes and an expansionist Soviet Union. The threat of this stand to American interests in Arab countries, according to this view, is limited as the Arabs need the United States more than it needs them.<sup>265</sup>

Regionalists, on the other hand, believe that such support to Israel poses a grave threat to American interests in the region as it drive nationalist regimes into the Soviet orbit, put American allies under great public strain, and encourages the radicalization of religious and nationalist movements. American Middle East policy, according to this view, should be evenhanded and characterized by striving to solve regional problems, namely the Arab-Israeli

---

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 71-72

<sup>264</sup> Avi Shlaim, *War and Peace in the Middle East* (US: Viking Penguin, 1995), 41-42

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 40.

conflict and the Palestinian problem, regardless of geopolitical considerations. Thus, American policies of successive administrations towards the region continued to swing between the two approaches, with the “Israel first” school being dominant most of the time.<sup>266</sup>

Cold War considerations, along with domestic politics, did much to convince President Truman to help create and then recognize the new state of Israel. Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, despite their evenhanded approach to the region, laid the basis for the special relationship with Israel. After approving the sale of light military equipment, President Eisenhower assured Israeli foreign minister Meir in late 1958 of unquestioned US support and protection. By October 1959, with much pressure from AIPAC and Congress, the president also approved \$100 million of assistance to Israel in the next two years and the sale of advanced radar equipment while he rejected their request for HAWK missiles to avoid triggering regional tensions.<sup>267</sup>

Notwithstanding Kennedy’s rapprochement with Egypt to seek a comprehensive peace agreement in the region, Israel was able to receive American assurances of continued protection in cases of hostilities and aggression. In return for approving its stalled request to buy six batteries of HAWK missiles, the Kenney administration pressed the Israelis to accept a UN proposal to receive one hundred thousand Palestinian refugees and to allow American observers regular visits to the Dimona nuclear reactor. When Meir could finally secure the HAWK deal, she rejected the UN refugee plan on the ground that it posed a threat to the security Israel.<sup>268</sup>

With instability mounting in the region, Israel pressed for more American commitments to stand for its security. The new Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol made some overtures to Washington by slowing the attacks on the West Bank and assuring that his country was not seeking a nuclear weapon. In a letter to Eshkol in October 1963, President Kennedy reiterated that “the United States would militarily assist Israel in case of attack” provided that Israel abstain from developing nuclear weapons.<sup>269</sup>

---

<sup>266</sup>Ibid, 41.

<sup>267</sup> Douglas Little, “The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-68” *Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 4 (November 1993): 567.

<sup>268</sup>Ibid, 568-569.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 572

Despite the development of the nuclear bomb in a stark breach of international law, Israel continued to receive the unconditional military and diplomatic support of the United States throughout the Arab-Israeli military conflict. With the coming of Sadat to power and the realignment of Egypt with the West, the Nixon administration brokered a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel that granted the latter an official recognition of the largest Arab country. Along with its position as a strategic asset for the West in the Cold War, Israel was a critical player in Nixon's "two pillars" strategy to share the burden of policing the region with its allies.

## **8- The Gulf War: The Dawn of a Unipolar Moment**

By the end of the Cold War, the United States was about to assume a hegemonic position in the Middle East and also around the world. In such position, U.S. policy makers became in a strong position to advance American interests and policies with no equal rival and with little to no meaningful challenge. In this context, the Palestinian issue and the relations with Iraq and Iran were to dominate most of the agenda of the American presidents in the decade after the end of the Cold War. President Bush's multilateral military operation against Iraq not only saved a regional ally from outside domination, but helped consolidate the international order the West have forged. President Clinton continued to view Iraq and Iran as two destabilizing states and charted in a consequence a policy of "dual containment. President Bush Jr. embarked on a conflict with Iraq that would in many ways determine the future of the American standing and policy in the region.

Soon after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, tensions between Iraq and its neighbor Kuwait began to disturb the region. While Kuwait was claiming the money it lent Iraq during the war, Saddam accused Kuwait of producing much oil and in turn driving oil prices down. Kuwait was also accused of extracting large amounts of oil from its borders with Iraq. From a historical perspective, the strains between the two states can be traced back to the beginning of the British rule when new borders were drawn in the region. Saddam continued to assert that Kuwait had been nothing but an Iraqi territory. The tensions were quick to assume a violent form when Iraq invaded Kuwait in early August 1990 and forced its rulers into exile. Western interests in the region were at stake and oil was the most important in the list. With his invasion, Saddam held 20% of the world's oil reserve and Saudi Arabia, which alone held another 20%, was prone to an Iraqi invasion. The United States and its allies were quick to react with economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure to halt Saddam's advance and drive him out of Iraq.

On August 8, 1990, American President George Bush explained his government's policy towards the invasion. The president combined Wilson's idealism with Nixon's realism. He praised his country and its allies' success in the struggle for freedom in Europe and heralded the dawn of a new era, an era that "can be full of promise, an age of freedom, a time of peace for all peoples." As he stressed the ideal side of America's mission, President Bush asserted that because of Saddam's actions "the stakes are high" in the region as the United States "imports nearly half the oil it consumes and could face a major threat to its economic independence."<sup>270</sup>

The Bush administration set four demands that would drive its response to the invasion; the complete and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the return of the exiled Kuwaiti government to power, the commitment of the United States to the security of the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, and finally the protection of U.S. citizens in the region. For the protection of Saudi Arabia from the advance of Iraqi forces the President ordered the deployment of "elements of the 82d Airborne Division as well as key units of the United States Air Force to take up defensive positions."<sup>271</sup>

The first step that the President Bush took to achieve his objectives was the employment of economic sanctions which included the "embargo of all trade with Iraq" along with "sanctions that both freeze all Iraqi assets in this country [United States] and protect Kuwait's assets." Moreover, U.S. allies like France, the U.K, and Japan also imposed "severe sanctions" while the Soviet Union and China halted all arms sale to Iraq. These moves were backed by the United Nations Security Council as "mandatory sanctions under chapter VII of the United Nations Charter"<sup>272</sup>

As sanctions were doing little to bring Saddam to heel, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell were advocating a military buildup in the Gulf with a deadline for Saddam to withdraw or face military force. The President approved the option and his Secretary of State James Baker began a tour of twelve

---

<sup>270</sup> George W. Bush, "Address on Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait (August 8, 1990)," *Miller Center*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-5529>.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

nations, including the Soviet Union and China, to marshal support behind a Security Council resolution to impose a deadline on Saddam's withdrawal.<sup>273</sup>

While America's allies in Europe and Japan continued to support the Bush administration, the Soviets and China needed further explanation. "The only way to produce a peaceful outcome" explained Baker to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev "was to convince Saddam that if he didn't withdraw peacefully, he would be forced out militarily." To the Chinese, who were little more skeptical, Baker asserted that "we don't hold it against our friends that they are not joining us, but we do ask that they not stand in the way."<sup>274</sup>

Along with international support to his decisions, Bush went on to secure further support at home through congressional authorization. In an address to a joint session of Congress on September 11, 1990, Bush argued that this war is the first test to what he called the "new world order" and that, "Had we not responded to this first provocation with clarity of purpose ..... it would be a signal to actual and potential despots around the world."<sup>275</sup> With placing America and the world in the same basket of stakes and interests, the President secured an approval of 250 to 183 in the House and 52 to 47 in the Senate.

With international and domestic support at hand, the United States was able to secure the Security Council Resolution 678 which put Iraq "in flagrant contempt of the Security Council" and authorized the U.N. member states to "use all necessary means" to force Iraq to abide by its decisions.<sup>276</sup> The resolution put the 15<sup>th</sup> of January as a deadline for Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait or face the military force of a coalition of more than 30 countries with 28 countries deploying ground troops.

As Saddam remained defiant, coalition forces began Operation Desert Storm on January 16, 1990. The attack was launched by air on Iraqi military targets in both Iraq and Kuwait. Industrial sites and major infrastructure were also targeted to weaken the Iraqi economy. On February 23, as Iraqi forces remained in Kuwait, ground troops were mobilized to launch a ground war to which Iraqi forces showed little resistance.<sup>277</sup> On February 27, after 100 hours

---

<sup>273</sup> Henry. W. Brands, "George Bush and the Gulf War of 1991," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1, (March 2004)

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 126-127.

<sup>275</sup> George W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress (September 11, 1990)," *Miller Center*, Virginia University, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-3425>

<sup>276</sup> Brands, *George Bush*, 127.

<sup>277</sup> Salim Yaqub, *The United States and the Middle East: from 1914 to 9/11* (USA: The Teaching Company, 2003), 9



of conflict, the U.S President announced that “Kuwait is liberated. Iraq's army is defeated. Our military objectives are met.”<sup>278</sup>

Apart from achieving their war objectives, by the end of the war the United States could boast a position of unparalleled influence in the Middle East and around the globe. The foremost achievement of the Bush administration was its ability to marshal international and domestic support for its policy. At the international level, it won a unanimous approval of the U.N Security Council to impose sanctions on Iraq, the first case since 23 years, and later to adopt a binding resolution to use all necessary means to implement its policy. At the domestic level, President Bush rallied the majority in Congress, the media and the public behind his cause. It could also turn the Soviet Union from a position of competition with the United States in the region to a position of cooperation, “nearly reducing the Soviet Union to the level of an assistant.”<sup>279</sup> Moreover, the victory of the American-led coalition confirmed the end of the Cold War, ending the threat of a nuclear confrontation and thus leaving the United States as the sole superpower not only in the Middle East but also on the world’s stage. The victory did also leave a big psychological impact on the American public. Before the war was launched, Americans were still skeptical of overseas interventions because of the bad experience left by the war in Vietnam. By the war’s end, the public grew a strong sense of relief and confidence.

The war, however, was not without setbacks. Contrary to what U.S experts expected that a military defeat of Saddam would bring an end to his rule, the Iraqi leader remained in power and further consolidated his position among the Sunni community after crushing the Shiite and Kurdish uprisings.<sup>280</sup> Saddam also gained popularity across the Arab world because of the missiles he launched on the Israeli capital. The pro-Soviet leader that America strove to court during the Iran-Iraq war and succeeded to do so by the end of it, proved to be one of the fiercest antagonists to U.S interests in the region and remained to be so in the decade to come.

Saddam’s persistence in power and Iran’s regional ambitions, as Americans see it, continued to be a threat to American interests in the region. When he assumed power in January 1993, Bill Clinton and his administration adopted what was known as the policy of “dual

---

<sup>278</sup> George W. Bush , Address on the End of the Gulf War (February 27, 1991), *Miller Center*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-5530>

<sup>279</sup> Shlaim, *War and Peace*, 105.

<sup>280</sup> Lawrence Friedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (Canada: Doubleday, 2008), 252

containment of Iran and Iraq.” Clinton’s special assistant to Near East affairs Martin Indyk argued that “to preserve a balance of power in our favor in the wider Middle East region, we will have the means to counter both the Iraqi and Iranian regimes. We will not need to depend on one to counter the other.”<sup>281</sup> With regard to Iraq, Indyk explained that the Clinton administration was committed to ensure, through the enforcement of U.N sanctions and resolutions, that as long as Saddam was in power he “will not be in a position to threaten its neighbors or to suppress its people with impunity.” As for Iran, the administration would continue to maintain “counterterrorism sanctions and other measures enacted by previous administrations to encourage a change in Iranian policy.”<sup>282</sup>

While President Clinton combined diplomacy with economic sanctions to prevent Saddam from threatening American interests in the region, the republican opposition was pressing for a more hawkish stance, including the use of force. In a letter to the president on January 26, 1998, some neoconservative members in PNAC<sup>283</sup> urged the President to adopt a new strategy for America’s foreign policy. This strategy should aim at the removal of Saddam Hussein from power by implementing “a full complement of diplomatic, political and military efforts,” arguing that “American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the UN Security Council.”<sup>284</sup> Although President Clinton did not resort to force to remove Saddam from power, he continued to press hard with economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and an increase in American military might in the region to deter Saddam’s threats to U.S interests and allies in the region. His Republican successor George Bush, on the other hand, adopted PNAC creed as the bible for his foreign policy and ultimately for his vision of the “global war on terror.”

## **9- The Bush Doctrine: The “War on Terror” and Regime Change in Iraq**

Unlike President Clinton whose foreign policy was widely devoted to the Arab-Israeli peace process and “humanitarian interventions” in various crises, his successor George W Bush came with an ambitious foreign policy agenda devised to advance America’s global leadership through diplomatic and even military means. Bush’s foreign policy agenda was

---

<sup>281</sup> Martin Indyk, “The Clinton Administration’s Approach to the Middle East” *The Washington Institute*, Soref Symposium 1993, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-clinton-administrations-approach-to-the-middle-east>

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Stands for the Project for the New American Century which is a think tank group with neoconservative agenda dedicated to preserve and expand America’s world leadership through all means including the use of force.

<sup>284</sup> “PNAC letters sent to President Bill Clinton,” Information Clearing House, January 26, 1998, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article5527.htm>

influenced by the thinking of some intellectuals and policymakers who came to hold key positions in his administration and by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC).

As a Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney developed a defense strategy that aimed to sustain America's hegemonic position by rejecting the notion of collective internationalism and advocating a "world dominated by one superpower whose position can be perpetuated by constructive behavior and sufficient military might to deter any nation or group of nations from challenging American primacy."<sup>285</sup> Along with Cheney's strategy, PNAC advocated America's resolve "to shape a new century favorable to American principles and interests." this vision should rely mostly on "a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges" and "a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad." From the historical experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the group argued, "it is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats before they become dire."<sup>286</sup> The group argued, however, that charting a bold foreign policy dominated by American military might is likely to be a long process without "some catastrophic and catalyzing event-like a new Pearl Harbor." Soon after this report came to being, the United States received a shocking attack on the morning of September 11, 2011, an event that gave "Washington a surfeit of purpose to go along with its preponderant power."<sup>287</sup>

In an address to Congress and the American people on September 20, Bush announced what he termed America's "global war on terror" which "begins with el Qaeda but does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated." By giving his war a global dimension, Bush echoed the danger that his country faced in WW1, WW2, and the Cold War by describing the group who attacked the U.S as "the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" because they "follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism."<sup>288</sup>

With a strong support from Congress and the American public, and with a broad international coalition force, the United States launched its war on Afghanistan and ousted the Taliban-led government, which was believed to shelter al Qaeda and the architects of 9/11 attacks, and

---

<sup>285</sup>Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop a One-Superpower World," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, <http://work.colum.edu/~amiller/wolfowitz1992.htm>

<sup>286</sup> "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Recourses for a New Century," Information clearing house, September 2000, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/pdf/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>

<sup>287</sup> Richard Haass, "The Irony of American Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 3(May/June 2013): pp. 57-67.

<sup>288</sup> "President Bush Addresses the Nation, Sept. 20, 2001," *Washington Post*, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html)

replaced it with an interim government led by Hamid Karzai. Though the war achieved its immediate objectives, the process of “nation-building” proved to be a daunting task. Moreover, Taliban militants regrouped again and launched an insurgency that bogged down U.S and coalition forces in a long and costly conflict.

Despite the sense of retaliation that the war on Afghanistan brought to the American people and policymakers, President Bush was bent on seizing the moment to build his own doctrine in which the long-nurtured policies of PNAC and politicians like Dick Cheney would have strong command. Through what came to be called the Bush Doctrine, American foreign policy broke with two pillars of the last half a century, namely the policy of containment and deterrence. In consequence, the doctrine introduced the ambitious principle of preemptive war. The doctrine was officially articulated in the national security strategy of the United States on September 20, 2002. While the doctrine emphasized the 20<sup>th</sup> century divide between totalitarianism and freedom and the ultimate victory of freedom through American leadership, it stressed that the challenge in the new century is more complex as it is posed by a combination of international terrorism and rogue states. Such new actors are very likely to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction against the U.S and its allies.<sup>289</sup>

The strategy classified Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “Axis of Evil” and as models of rogue states. It also asserted that, during the Gulf War, the United States “acquired irrefutable proof that Iraq’s designs were not limited to the chemical weapons...but also extended to the acquisition of nuclear weapons and biological agents.” As a policy to confront the acquisition and use of WMD, the Bush doctrine advocated the principle of preemptive action which is carried out through “proactive counter proliferation efforts” which requires the U.S to “deter and defend against the threat before it is unleashed.”<sup>290</sup>

Even before the formulation of this doctrine and immediately after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush and many of the neoconservatives in his circle were contemplating a war on Saddam. Bush asked one of his advisers to look for “any shred” of evidence that could provide any link of Saddam to the 9/11 attacks. The U.S intelligence, on its part, was able to twist

---

<sup>289</sup> “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002,”

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>

<sup>290</sup> Ibid. , p. 14.

information to suit the White House officials' need for pretexts to launch a war on Iraq. As a senior British diplomat put it, "intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."<sup>291</sup>

Several officials in the Bush administration and members in PNAC group, who were already hell-bent on removing Saddam from power, began a campaign to rally support behind their cause. Among these officials were the adviser in the Defense Department Richard Perle, Cheney's chief of staff Libby, Undersecretary of Defense Feith and Undersecretary of State John Bolton. The views of such officials were strongly supported by Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and even by the president himself. The reasons put forward by these officials to wage a war on Iraq were diverse. Saddam was not only providing support to international terrorism, but was also developing WMD. Affecting regime change would bring a lasting peace to America's ally in the region, Israel and Iraq would eventually develop into a thriving democracy and become a model for other nations in the region to emulate.<sup>292</sup>

With an ever-growing presidency, a Senate controlled by republicans, and a weak and divided opposition, the president was able to secure Congressional approval for his war in October 2002.<sup>293</sup> Contrary to a consent easily obtained at home, the Bush administration found it harder to secure legitimacy for his war at the international level. Following his Secretary of State's advice to go to the U.N for a resolution to use force, the president and his diplomats made enormous pressure on some members of the Security Council, namely Mexico, Chile and some West African Nations to support the American cause. The American efforts were eventually thwarted by the strong opposition of France, Germany and China, with only Britain, Spain and Bulgaria providing support.<sup>294</sup>

With a congressional approval, a divided American public and the absence of a Security Council resolution to use force, the U.S-led military coalition began military operations against Iraq on March 23, 2003. In no more than three weeks, with a combination of airstrikes and ground troops operations, Saddam was ousted and the Iraq army was dismantled. On May 1st, President Bush landed on USS Lincoln and delivered a speech declaring that "in the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed." While

---

<sup>291</sup> David Manning "The Secret Downing Street Memo," 23 July 2002, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB328/II-Doc14.pdf>

<sup>292</sup> George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: US Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 945.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid, 949.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

the president praised the Operation Iraqi Freedom as one that was “carried out with a combination of precision, speed and boldness the enemy did not expect and the world have never seen before,” he also acknowledged that “transition from dictatorship to democracy will take time, but it is worth every effort.”<sup>295</sup>

At the time the president announced victory, coalition forces were making little if any progress to preserve order and stability. In mid-May, the U.S installed an interim government led by the American diplomat Paul Bremer who barred senior members of the Ba’ath Party from taking any official positions and dismantled the Iraq army and the security forces.<sup>296</sup> Many of those forces along with Sunni tribes embarked on an all-out popular insurgency for which American forces had little training and experience. By early 2004, al Qaida announced the establishment of its base in Iraq under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The operations of this latter were directed not only against coalition forces, but also against the Shiite majority who were cooperating with them.<sup>297</sup>

In 2005, officials in Washington were lamenting the Vietnamization of Iraq. The Vietnam veteran Chuck Hagel drew a parallel between Vietnam and Iraq referring to the “more dead, more wounded, ... more insurgency attacks, more insurgents coming across the border [and] more corruption in the government.” As the Iraqi insurgency persisted, the economic and security situation in Iraq deteriorated and American officials’ range of policy options became only limited. Far from becoming a democratic, stable and secure state, Iraq turned out to be a hotbed of bloodshed and sectarian conflicts, and one of the most corrupt countries around the world.

## **Conclusion**

The expansion of American involvement in the Middle East has been proportionate to its expanding interests which grew from the periphery to occupy center stage in the calculus of American foreign policy in general. As the country was preoccupied with continental expansion during the nineteenth century, American interactions with the region were dominated by educational and missionary activities. The discovery of oil in the region represents a turning point in direction of US Middle East policy. With the advent of the Cold

---

<sup>295</sup>“Bush makes historic speech aboard warship, Friday, May 2, 2003,” CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript/>

<sup>296</sup>Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies*, 436.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, 437-438.

War US policy makers had to contend with Soviet influence and the rising tide of Arab nationalism to protect what become part of America's core national interests. By the end of the Cold War the US came to enjoy a unipolar moment in the region and around the world, a position that would be soon be challenged by two costly wars.

# **Chapter Three**

## **Retrenchment and Obama's Middle East Policy**



## Introduction

Obama's retrenchment approach to the Middle East was not, as many suggest, a simple reaction to his predecessor's expansive foreign policy, but was time and again revisited and reaffirmed despite the changes that have swept the region in the last decade. While his critics accused him of lacking an overarching strategy, retrenchment, generally defined as withdrawing from costly deployments overseas, avoiding new demanding commitments and seeking low-cost instruments to conduct of foreign policy, remained the *guiding principle* of Obama's Middle East strategy.

In Iraq, while the withdrawal of troops was already scheduled by the Bush administration, the process of a *complete* withdrawal against the advice of even Obama's closest advisers to leave a residual force raises serious questions. Even the expansive civilian mission that was planned to replace a military occupation was repeatedly curtailed, even at times when the threat to U.S. interests demanded otherwise. Apart from the termination of the police training program and the downsizing of U.S. Iraq mission by more than 60 percent, U.S. aid to Iraq, both in civilian and military form, dropped drastically during the Obama presidency, thus leaving Washington with little, if any, leverage to influence yet another unfolding crisis in the country.

In Syria, despite the limitations of sanctions and multilateral diplomacy to bring a change in the conflict that would be in line with American preferences, official Washington not only ruled out every military option, but resisted even the provision of lethal aid to the "moderate" and "pro-Western" opposition. When the "red line," which Obama threatened would "change his calculus" and incur "enormous consequences" was eventually crossed, the president turned to a divided Congress to seek authorization for the use of force and then welcomed a Russian negotiated settlement, thus dealing a blow to U.S. credibility.

When he finally decided to embark on a limited military operation against the group known as ISIS, and in his counterterrorist campaign more generally, Obama turned to the rulebook retrenching states have historically used in similar conditions. While his administration often encouraged the backup of the Syrian opposition through its regional partners, it recruited its regional allies to share in the burden of the campaign through funding, logistical support and even the participation with their own air forces. On the ground, local forces and even non-state actors were in the frontline of the battlefield, while the task of Western forces was confined to the provision of training and intelligence. In another move to minimize casualties

and risk, the Pentagon turned to the extensive use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) as the instrument of choice to conduct military operations.

While a new approach to deal with Iran by a progressive democratic president was much anticipated, the extent to which Obama went to accommodate, and for critics even to appease, Tehran was very remarkable. Beyond the cozy correspondence with the Iranian supreme leader and the reconciliatory tone in his political discourse, Obama continued to avoid confronting Iran in many occasions, especially in the 2009 popular protests and Iran's concerted efforts to project influence across the region. While this attitude was often construed as a way to court the Iranians to the negotiating table and later on make further concessions in the negotiations, Obama's defiance of Congress and America's closest regional allies to adopt an uncompromising Iran policy is evident of his determination to depart from the confrontational and costly stance that characterized US Iran policy for decades.

## **1- Beyond Troop Withdrawal: Downsizing the US Role in Iraq**

President Obama's retrenchment in Iraq went beyond the much publicized decision to withdraw American troops and expanded to include almost every aspect of U.S. commitment to this country. The option to leave a residual troop was abandoned altogether, despite the Pentagon's view which advised otherwise. The police training program, which meant to preserve some influence on the Iraqi security apparatus, was soon to receive sharp cuts in staff and funding and was eventually terminated in 2013. The large civilian mission that was envisioned to replace an unpopular military occupation was also curtailed drastically by 61 percent, and the once envisaged consulate in Basra never came to being. Foreign aid, a critical benchmark of American influence and commitment, was no exception as U.S. military aid was cut from \$4143 million in 2007 to only \$22 million in 2014.

### **1-2 Complete Troop Withdrawal**

In outlining his Iraq strategy in 2009, Obama praised the relative progress made in Iraqi security and acknowledged the intricate challenges that continued to affect the country like sectarian violence, divisive politics, declining oil revenues and an ailing economy. After more than six years of American occupation, Iraq was yet to be a full partner with its close environment and the international community, including the United States. Based on the assessments of his national security team and the security agreements between Iraq and the previous US administration, Obama concluded that "the long-term solution in Iraq must be political – not military," and that "the most important decisions that have to be made about Iraq's future must now be made by the Iraqis."<sup>298</sup>

Distancing the U.S. from the mission of nation-building sought by the previous administration was formulated in light of a rearrangement made in U.S. security priorities. As Afghanistan and Pakistan moved to the top of Obama's foreign policy agenda, Iraq was relegated to a secondary position. While the overarching objective of the Obama administration in Iraq was to see a country that is "sovereign, stable and self-reliant," the president did not elucidate how such objectives would be achieved apart from helping Iraq "build new ties of trade and commerce with the world." Convinced that his government

---

<sup>298</sup> "Obama's Speech at Camp Lejeune, N.C.," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/us/politics/27obama-text.html>

cannot support a commitment to an Iraq that had already strained the US military and economy, Obama stuck to his predecessor's timetable for troop withdrawal.<sup>299</sup>

This withdrawal was arranged through the Status of Force Agreement of November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008 between the Bush administration and the Iraqi government. Article 24 of the agreement stipulates that all American forces would withdraw from Iraq before December 31, 2011 and that combat forces should leave Iraqi cities and villages as soon as Iraqi forces take over the responsibility of providing security. The agreement also recognizes the right of the Iraqi government not to extend the UN mandate, ending on December 31, 2008, which authorizes the presence of a multinational force in Iraq.<sup>300</sup>

In his first letter to congressional leaders on the global deployment of US armed forces overseas on June 15, 2009, President Obama reported the presence of 138,000 troops in Iraq and noted that during the transition period, before December 31, 2011, the US military would assist in strengthening the Iraqi security forces and its political institutions.<sup>301</sup> In his letter of June 15, 2012, the president reported that "The United States completed its responsible withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in December 2011, in accordance with the 2008 Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq."<sup>302</sup>

In completing this process, the Pentagon belied reports that the withdrawn troops would be stationed in other areas of the Gulf. Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, asserted that "there are not really plans to have any substantial increases in any other parts of the Gulf as this war winds down" and noted that the US military presence in the region would return to a pre-1990 level. Rhodes also explained that this decision was envisioned within a larger framework, "to demilitarize elements of our foreign policy and establish more normal relationships"<sup>303</sup>

---

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> "Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of their Activities during their Presence in Iraq," *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122074.pdf>

<sup>301</sup> "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces," *The American Presidency Project*, June 15, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-global-deployments-united-states-combat-equipped-armed>

<sup>302</sup> "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces," *The American Presidency Project*, June 15, 2012, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-deployment-united-states-combat-equipped-armed-forces-0>

<sup>303</sup> Josh Rogin, "White House: We are Returning to a pre-1990 Military Stance in the Gulf," December 16, 2011, *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/16/white-house-we-are-returning-to-a-pre-1990-military-stance-in-the-gulf/>

As the upheavals that swept the region turned into armed conflicts in Iraq and Syria, and as external powers were propping up their allies on the ground, American forces made a comeback to the region in what the Obama administration asserted to be for a *non-combat mission*. The deployed force, according to the president, was tasked to protect the American embassy and its personnel in Baghdad, to coordinate with Iraqi forces, and to provide “training, communications support, intelligence support, and other support to select elements of the Iraqi forces, including Kurdish Peshmerga forces,”<sup>304</sup> By the time he left office, the president left behind a force of 5262 troops in Iraq and 300 in Syria.<sup>305</sup>

In his remarks on the situation in Iraq on June 19, 2014, the president asserted again that “American forces will not be returning to combat in Iraq,” while he noted that his approach to the crisis in the region was informed by a conviction that “there is no military solution inside Iraq, certainly not one led by the United States.” In response to a remark that his decision to send military advisers is but a first step to a broader “boots on the ground scenario,” the president insisted that “We do not have the ability to simply solve this problem by sending in tens of thousands of troops and committing the kinds of blood and treasure that has already been expended in Iraq. Ultimately, this is something that is going to have to be solved by the Iraqis.”<sup>306</sup>

The Obama administration not only followed the deadline of troop withdrawal set forth by the previous administration, but also turned down the proposition to leave a residual force, a decision taken against the advice of the Pentagon and his close advisers. Obama’s critics believe that he is to blame for the renewed violence and that had he left this force, Iraqi forces would be better equipped to repel the militant insurgency and the US intelligence would be better informed. Sympathizers with Obama’s decision argue that this choice was dictated by Iraqi politics and that even with a large military; the US would not have the needed leverage to prevent such crisis.

---

<sup>304</sup> “Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces,” *The American Presidency Project*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-global-deployment-united-states-combat-equipped-armed-0>

<sup>305</sup> “Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces,” *The American Presidency Project*, December 05, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-global-deployment-united-states-combat-equipped-armed-4>

<sup>306</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Iraq,” *The White House* June 19, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>

In reality, Obama's decision was born out of a very complex divergence in views between the Pentagon and the White House on the one hand and the White House and the Iraqi government on the other. US military officials lobbied for a residual force of 20,000 troops but White House officials believed 10,000 troops is sufficient for the mission. After intense and long deliberations, the two sides settled on a force of 5,000 troops but Obama's circle insisted that any agreement with the Iraqis must provide for legal immunities for such force from Iraqi law, a provision that has to be endorsed by the Iraqi legislature.<sup>307</sup>

Despite the Iraqi prime minister's offer to use his prerogatives to provide for such legal immunities, President Obama insisted on the consent of the Iraqi parliament. Colin H. Kahl, the national security advisor on Iraq policy, maintained that the consent of the Iraqi parliament is the only route for the agreement to be binding. Divisions within the Iraqi parliament made the ratification of any agreement a daunting task. Within the political spectrum, the Kurds welcomed an agreement that provide for legal immunities, but the Sadrists opposed any US military presence in Iraq. Less hardliners expressed their approval of an American residual force, but rejected the provision of legal immunities.<sup>308</sup>

In defense of his decision and in response to the press on whether he regrets his decision not to leave a residual force, the president contended that it was not a decision made by him but by the Iraqi government. Immunities against local laws is "a core requirement" for the presence of US troops anywhere and Prime Minister Maliki and the Iraqi government declined to provide for such immunities.<sup>309</sup> A BBC report described the decision as a "humiliating moment for the United States" after its government "had lobbied hard, and publicly, for a new agreement that would allow the US to keep a contingent of several thousand soldiers in Iraq."<sup>310</sup>

Former US ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey contends that Obama's decision was the product of a variety of factors. For the Obama administration Iraq was relatively stable and the public was as resistant to US military presence as many Iraqi lawmakers. The United States did not

---

<sup>307</sup> Peter Baker, "Relief over US Exit from Iraq Fades as Reality Overtakes Hope," June 22, 2014, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/23/world/middleeast/relief-over-us-exit-from-iraq-fades-as-reality-overtakes-hope.html>

<sup>308</sup> Colin H. Kahl, "No, Obama didn't Lose Iraq: What the President's Critics get Wrong," *Politico*, June 15, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/no-obama-didnt-lose-iraq-107874>

<sup>309</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by the President*

<sup>310</sup> Gabriel Gatehouse, "Iran 'Influenced' Iraq Over US Troops' Exit," *BBC*, November 14, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15724404>

have much leverage on the Iraqi government to press for a legal presence of US forces and military sales were as vital for the United States as they were for the Iraqis.<sup>311</sup>

In addition to such political determinants, president Obama did have a strong preference for a complete military withdrawal. Pressing hard for a residual force would go against his campaign promise to bring home US forces from Iraq and might as well alienate his voters in his constituencies.<sup>312</sup> Obama also believed Iraq to be a war of choice that should be relegated to marshal forces for the war of 'necessity' in Afghanistan and that a prolonged American military presence there would exacerbate rather than improve the security situation.<sup>313</sup> Much like Maliki in Iraq, Obama was trying to win political points domestically while working to build much needed image of the United States as a force of good on the international stage.

## **2-2 The US Mission Iraq: Scaling Back Staff and Operations**

Apart from complete troop withdrawal, the decline in US civilian mission is a key benchmark of Obama's tendency to ax American commitments to Iraq. The termination of the Police Development Program (PDP) is but an example of how non-military initiatives to preserve American influence were abandoned one after the other. The program was initially created by the Department of Defense and cost 8\$ billion between 2003 and 2011. The decision of the Obama administration to transfer the tasks of the US military to the Iraq civilian mission meant that the program would be a States Department's responsibility which planned its extension to another five years with a one billion dollars as an annual budget.<sup>314</sup>

This program was also revealing of the administration's objective to promote American influence and protect its interests through less militaristic instruments. Speaking to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in early 2011, ambassador James Jeffrey argued that the training of the Iraqi police, and US diplomatic mission more generally, represents the most cost-effective alternative to military presence to promote American influence and deter threats emanating from el Qaida and Iran, especially after a decade-long costly military presence.<sup>315</sup>

---

<sup>311</sup> James F. Jeffrey, "Behind the US Withdrawal from Iraq," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 2, 2014, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/behind-the-u.s.-withdrawal-from-iraq>

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> James Traub, "The Mess Obama Left Behind," *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/07/the-mess-obama-left-behind-in-iraq-surge-debate/>

<sup>314</sup> Richard R. Brennan et al, *Ending the US War in Iraq* (US: RAND Corporation, 2013), 191-192, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR232.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR232.html)

<sup>315</sup> James F. Jeffrey, "Iraq: The Challenging Transition to a Civilian Mission," *US Department of State*, February 1, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/155827.htm>

The program faced repeated obstacles that hindered its operations and led eventually to its termination. Like many transition schemes, American officials garbled with the lack support from Iraqi officials. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law enforcement (INL), the State Department institution supervising the PDP, lacked credible data about the needs and capabilities of the Iraqi police force and faced difficulties in recruitment thanks to a hostile security environment. Such environment warranted the provision of more security measures for trainers, a step that would not only be costly but also required a Congressional approval that is hard to obtain.<sup>316</sup>

The program saw significant reductions both in staff and training centers. While the State Department planned to engage 350 advisers across 28 training sites, it subsequently reduced the number to 150 in early 2011 and then to 115 by the end of the year. Despite such reductions, only 90 trainers were actually engaged to work in 21 centers.<sup>317</sup> On May 22, 2012 the subcommittee on foreign aid in the Senate agreed to cease funding for the program on the basis that troop withdrawal would make American trainers at risk and that the bulk of the program's budget was devoted to personnel protection rather than to actual training.<sup>318</sup> The Office Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reported to Congress similar challenges to the effective operation of the program and cited concerns of security and lack of Iraqi cooperation. The report also disclosed the termination of the training center in Basra and the relocation of its personnel to the main training facility in Baghdad.<sup>319</sup>

US inspector general Stewart Bowen revealed to *The Cable* that the Obama administration initially envisaged the PDP as a *big project*, but the State Department did not devote the necessary means to make it happen. Bowen also anticipated that absent Iraqi cooperation, and particularly its "written commitment," the PDP would unlikely to last for more than six months.<sup>320</sup> In a semiannual report of September 2013, the general inspector concluded that because of the audits conducted by his team, the program was aborted altogether in March 2013. "Had the program continued", the report concluded, "support costs would have

---

<sup>316</sup> Brennan et al, *Ending the US War*, 192.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid, 193

<sup>318</sup> Susan Cornwell, "US Senators Cut Funds for Iraq Police Training Program," *Reuters*, May 22, 2012, <https://af.reuters.com/article/egyptNews/idAFL1E8GMDPF20120522>

<sup>319</sup> "Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report," Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, July 30, 2012, [https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001094456/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/July2012/Report - July 2012.pdf#view=fit](https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001094456/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/July2012/Report%20-%20July%202012.pdf#view=fit), pp 3-4

<sup>320</sup> Josh Rogin, "Report: State Department's Iraq Police Training Program Being Scaled Back even Further," *Foreign Policy*, July 30, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/07/30/report-state-departments-iraq-police-training-program-being-scaled-back-even-further/>



comprised 94% of the program's funding in FY 2013, and the cost for each police advisor would have doubled from an already exorbitant \$2.1 million to \$4.2 million per year."<sup>321</sup>

Scaling back American presence in Iraq extended even to the Iraq diplomatic mission which the Obama administration planned to be the largest in the world, with 16,000 personnel active in 14 sites across the country. The pentagon and the department state allocated \$ 4.5 billion and \$ 4 billion for FY 2010 and FY 2012 respectively for the task of transferring the US activities from a the military to the diplomatic mission.<sup>322</sup> The mission was dubbed by *The Washington Post* as "a country within a country" which "has \$6 billion budget, its own airline and three hospitals, and imports virtually all of its food," and was revealing of THE Obama White House' plan for a robust American civilian and diplomatic presence.<sup>323</sup>

Shortly after the transition was accomplished, the State Department embarked on series of reductions in the Iraq mission both in personnel and operating sites. From 2012 to 2014 the mission was downsized by 61 percent, from 16, 298 in January 2012 down to 6, 320 in January 2014.<sup>324</sup> Most of these cuts concerned contractor staff that was responsible for life and support services whose number fell from 12,895 in early 2012 to 4,460 in early 2014. Staff of the Office of Security Cooperation Iraq which was responsible for training the Iraqi police declined from 4, 067 to 184 in the same period.<sup>325</sup> The reductions in staff were affected through the closure of nine sites. The Baghdad Police Academy Annex and the Consulate General Kirkuk were shut down in September 2012 and the Office of Security Cooperation Tikrit in May 2013. Most of the facilities in the Baghdad Embassy Prosperity Annex were closed in May 2013. The Diplomatic Support Center in Erbil was also closed in July 2013 putting an end to 1000 contractor jobs.<sup>326</sup> The consulate of Mosul with its 700 personnel never came to being mainly because of the lack funding.<sup>327</sup> Apart from the often-cited financial reasons behind such reductions, American officials also put forward the security

---

<sup>321</sup> "Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report," Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, September 09, 2013, [https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001092420/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/September2013/Report\\_-\\_September\\_2013.pdf#view=fit](https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001092420/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/September2013/Report_-_September_2013.pdf#view=fit), 28.

<sup>322</sup> Michael J. Courts, "State and DOD Face Challenges in Finalizing Support and Security Capabilities," US Government Accountability Office, June 28, 2012, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/600/591997.pdf>

<sup>323</sup> Karen DeYoung, "US Evaluating Size of Baghdad Embassy, Officials Say," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-evaluat...ials-say/2012/02/07/gIQABP8axQ\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d1bc0d059ac4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-evaluat...ials-say/2012/02/07/gIQABP8axQ_story.html?utm_term=.d1bc0d059ac4)

<sup>324</sup> Harold W. Geisel, "Audit of the US Mission Iraq Staffing Process," *Office of the Inspector General*, August 2013, <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/214910.pdf>, p 28

<sup>325</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>327</sup> Tim Arango, "US Planning to Slash Iraq Embassy Staff by as much as Half," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/world/middleeast/united-states-planning-to-slash-iraq-embassy-staff-by-half.html>

environment in Iraq and the lack of Iraqi cooperation as the main challenges to an expanded diplomatic presence.<sup>328</sup>

### **2-3 Foreign Aid in Decline**

Foreign aid is a no less significant instrument to conduct foreign policy and promote American interests. American aid to Iraq after the occupation is commensurate to the level of American military and diplomatic presence, soaring with the Bush administration and declining markedly during Obama's two terms in office. Both the department of state and the Pentagon are involved in allocating foreign aid, but the US Agency for International Development (USAID) is the main organization leading the process. Given the budgetary constraints that the Obama administration continued to face, the repeated reductions enacted to the aid to Iraq fall within the larger framework of scaling back American commitments and came in line with the White House's retrenchment approach to bridge the gap between available resources and foreign policy objectives.

In 2007, what is considered the apogee of American involvement in Iraq, U.S. aid reached \$3.816 billion but declined to \$2.252 billion in 2009 and down to \$565 million in 2016. The share of USAID declined proportionally from \$2.137 billion to \$1.107 billion, and down to \$378 million in the same period, with an all-time low amount of \$101 million in 2014. The relative rise in the State Department's assistance from \$360 million in 2007 to \$763 million in 2009 is due to the costs of the transition process to the civilian mission, but by 2016 such assistance declined sharply to reach only \$187 million.<sup>329</sup>

The decline in US military assistance to Iraq was also proportionate to civilian aid with marked drop from \$4.143 billion in 2007 to only \$22 million in 2014.<sup>330</sup> Foreign funds to Iraq in the last two years of Obama's second term in office were provided largely by the Pentagon, with military aid rising sharply to \$1.542 billion in 2015 and to \$4.715 billion in 2016 as part of the military campaign against ISIS.<sup>331</sup> The State Department explained that among such military aid, \$2.7 billion was designated to Iraq as a Foreign Military Financing (FMF) loan which would "fund a wide range of Iraqi FMS (Foreign Military Sale) cases" and

---

<sup>328</sup> Geisel, *Audit of the US Mission*, 4-5.

<sup>329</sup> "US Overseas Loans and Grants, Obligations and Loan Authorizations" USAID, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2009, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2012, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2016, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/IRQ>

<sup>330</sup> Ibid

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

enable “countries to pay for FMS purchases through borrowed funds which will be repaid over an eight-year period.”<sup>332</sup>

Downsizing American commitments to Iraq during Obama’s years in office was carried out in the backdrop of what Obama’s critics believe to be Iran’s expanding activities in Iraq and its potential role in driving the opposition to a residual US force. A senior adviser to the Iraqi prime minister noted that officials in Baghdad did take into account Iranian role and concerns. “We understand that there is certain sensitivity,” he explained, “and we do not want an excuse for the Iranians to intervene in Iraq on the pretext that you have American troops.”<sup>333</sup> The spokesman of the American embassy in Baghdad denied any Iranian influence on the matter of the residual force maintaining that the Iraqis “are sovereign because they did make their own decision.”<sup>334</sup>

The argument that Obama’s Iraq policy was only a response to his predecessor is not well-founded. While the decision to transform American presence from a military to a civilian one falls within Obama’s approach to depart from his predecessor’s, the failure to make means and ends meet is evident of an ever-present imperial overstretch . In other words, the Obama administration initially made some expensive commitments to preserve some of American influence through a civilian mission, but the rising costs of this mission in an increasingly insecure environment pressed for further measures of cuts and reductions that only prove retrenchment to be Obama’s policy of choice.

## **2- Syria: The Mismatch between Means and Ends**

Obama’s Syria policy is a textbook case of his retrenchment approach to the Middle East. While in Iraq the president withdrew from costly commitments, in Syria he resisted to engage in new ones. Despite the repeatedly stated preference for a Syria without Assad ruled by a pro-western opposition, the Obama administration did little, apart from non-lethal support and diplomatic activism, to bring this vision to fruition. Even after the “red line” he drew against the use of chemical weapons was crossed, Obama turned to a divided Congress to authorize the use of force and then accepted a Russian negotiated settlement. When he finally decided to get militarily involved, the objective was exclusively to fight ISIS through a strategy that combined airstrikes and the reliance on local forces and regional allies to share

---

<sup>332</sup> Office of the Spokesperson, “US Security Cooperation with Iraq,” *U.S. Department of State*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269040.htm>

<sup>333</sup> Gatehouse, *Iran ‘Influenced’ Iraq*

<sup>334</sup> Ibid

in the cost of the military operation. From the time the Syrian crisis came to the fore in 2011 to his last days in office, Obama's overall strategy remained the resistance of any US involvement to a degree capable to reverse the trajectory of events to be in line with American preferences.

## **2-1 The Limits of Non-Military Alternatives**

US-Syrian relations have been rife with hostility in the last half a century. Since Hafez el Assad came to power in 1970, the US saw his rule as a danger to US interests in the region, especially with his stance in the Arab-Israeli conflict and his alignment with the Soviets in the Cold War. Obama's promises to engage with the Syrian regime were not materialized and the upheavals that swept the region and which soon triggered conflict in Syria brought to the fore the old East-West rivalry for influence in the country.

The official response to the protests in Syria were met with US official condemnations of what American officials saw as an unjustified use of force against the people's right of assembly. August 18, 2011 was the turning point in Obama's position towards the events when he called for Bashar el Assad to step down because he could not lead "a democratic transition" and announced a series of sanctions against the Syrian government imposed by the US and its European allies. Although Obama recognized the Syrian people's resistance to foreign intervention in their revolution, he noted that "the United States will support an effort to bring about a Syria that is democratic, just, and inclusive for all Syrians" by "pressuring Bashar el Assad to step out of the way of this transition."<sup>335</sup>

In his first address to the UN General Assembly after the start of the protests, Obama called for an alignment with the US position and categorized any other stance as an approval of the oppression, "the question for us is clear, will we stand with the Syrian people or with their oppressors." He reiterated the sanctions his country and its European allies imposed on Syria and called for the Security Council to "sanction the Syrian government and stand with the Syrian people." and to "speak with one voice... for the sake of the Syrian people and the security of the World."<sup>336</sup>

---

<sup>335</sup>Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria," *the White House*, August 18, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>

<sup>336</sup>Barack Obama, "Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City," *The American Presidency Project*, September 21, 2011, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-3>

The sanctions imposed by the Obama administration targeted sitting officials like the President, his Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid el Mualim, and his senior advisor Bothaina Chaabane. Economic sanctions froze all the assets of the Syrian government and shut down US imports of Syrian petroleum and petroleum products. US citizens were banned from making any financial transactions involving the Syrian government and from investing in Syria. Congress on its part passed a number of legislations that range from condemning the Assad regime and supporting the protests, to denying companies that invest in the Syrian energy sector access to U.S. financial institutions.<sup>337</sup>

In a statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman acknowledged that he did not know for sure “when the tipping point, the breaking point will come in Syria,” and assured the committee that “all of the elements of US policy towards Syria are channeled toward the arrival of that tipping point,” which is the “demise of the Assad regime.” As of the date of his statement, these elements were exclusively of diplomatic form. Feltman reported the US and European sanctions on the Syrian government, the support of the Arab League’s transition plan, and the formation of the Friends of the Syrian people in Tunis which comprises 60 countries to “take practical steps to address the Syrian crisis.”<sup>338</sup>

At the UN level, the US sponsored a number of Security Council resolutions that faced the Russian, and sometimes the Chinese, veto on the ground that they were a “backdoor” for military intervention. In October 2011, a European-led resolution to condemn the Syrian government was vetoed by Russia and China who complained that the resolution did not rule out military intervention and expressed fears that it would be a road for another Libya. Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the UN, described the veto as a “cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people.”<sup>339</sup> In a press conference after the vote, Rice claimed that “Libya has been beat to death, overused, and

---

<sup>337</sup>Jeremy M. Shar and Christopher M. Blanchard, “Unrest in Syria and US Sanctions against the Assad Regime,” *CRS*, November 9, 2011, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20111109\\_RL33487\\_4589890a9a2d613892f60b36b4191ac0b6b3b936.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20111109_RL33487_4589890a9a2d613892f60b36b4191ac0b6b3b936.pdf)

<sup>338</sup>Jeffrey D. Feltman, “Syria: the Crisis and its Implications,” *US Department of State*, March 1, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/185264.htm>

<sup>339</sup> “China and Russia Veto UN Resolution Condemning Syria,” *BBC*, October 5, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15177114>

misused as an excuse for countries not to take up their responsibilities with respect to Syria”<sup>340</sup>

Louis Charbonneau described the second Russian veto to a resolution in February 2012 that called for the transfer of power to Assad’s vice president as an effort going beyond the “protection for a close ally and arms buyer,” and demonstrates the Russian approach to resist “what it sees as a Western crusade to use the United Nations to topple unfriendly regimes.” The veto also reveals a profound divide between Russia and China on the one hand and the West on the legality of using the UN to intervene in other countries’ internal affairs, especially with the lately introduced western-sponsored principle of “the responsibility to protect.”<sup>341</sup>

The other European-led resolution in the same year was the first that would revoke Chapter VII of the UN charter which permits Security Council members to use all measures, including military force, to ensure Assad forces stop the use of “heavy weapons” in the conflict. The Russians vetoed the resolution on the same ground, that the text failed to exclude the option of military intervention and that it was biased against the Syrian government. While Susan Rice admitted resorting to Chapter VII to make sure Assad comply with the transition plan, she denied that it would authorize or open the door for outside military intervention.<sup>342</sup>

While the US accused the Russians of standing in the way of the efforts to end the conflict, Lakhdar Brahimi, the former UN envoy to Syria, told Aljazeera in March 2016 that “everybody should have listened to the Russians a little bit more” because they “had much more realistic analysis of the situation than practically everybody else.” Brahimi accused all outside forces of exacerbating the conflict by backing different sides and disregarding the Syrian people’s interests, but acknowledged what he saw “a missed opportunity” when the Russians offered to pressure Assad to leave power in 2012.<sup>343</sup>

---

<sup>340</sup>Susan E. Rice, “Veto of a UN Security Council Resolution on Syria,” *U.S. Department of State*, October 4, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/rm/2011/175033.htm>

<sup>341</sup>Louis Charbonneau, “Russia U.N. veto on Syria aimed at crushing West's crusade,” *Reuters*, February 8, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-russia/russia-u-n-veto-on-syria-aimed-at-crushing-west-s-crusade-idUSTRE8170BK20120208>

<sup>342</sup>“Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria That Would Have Threatened Sanctions, Due to Negative Votes of China, Russian Federation,” *U.N. Security Council*, July 19, 2012, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10714.doc.htm>

<sup>343</sup> Lewis Smith, “Syria Conflict: West should have listened to Russia, says UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi,” *The Independent*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-west-should-have-listened-to-russia-says-un-special-envoy-lakhdar-brahimi-a6927571.html>

## 2-2 The Dismal Prospects of Military Options

Apart from sanctions and diplomatic activism, the US ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, reported the provision of “non-lethal” support for the opposition. Such support ranged from pieces of equipment like communication gears to training local activists; an effort aimed at “knitting the national opposition leadership with local councils on the ground inside Syria.”<sup>344</sup> Although US officials continued to call for Assad to step down and recognized the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, the US support for the opposition was meant to “prevent the influence of el Qaida’s affiliates from expanding” and to “curtail the influence of extremists.”<sup>345</sup>

Elizabeth Jones, acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, set a grandiose vision of a Syria without Assad ruled by a pro-American moderate opposition, but provided no tangible ways to realize it. In her testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jones claimed that Assad had long lost legitimacy and would play no role in any transitional government. While she asserted that the US would “continue to find ways to pressure him [Assad] to think differently”, she concluded that it was not “in the United States or the Syrian people best interest to provide lethal support to the Syrian opposition.”<sup>346</sup>

One of the major qualms Obama critics have raised was the gulf between the ends and means and the rhetoric and the reality in his Syria policy. John Alterman of the Center of Strategic and International Studies warned against setting ambitious goals that would breed a sense of failure when not realized. The lessons of US Iraq policy ever since late 1980s show that even a set of policy options, from engagement to sanctions and military force, could not bring satisfactory outcomes because of the US “inability to shape outcomes in complex and polarized situations.”<sup>347</sup> Despite what US officials deemed as threats posed by the Syrian conflict to American national interests in the region, the White House continued to exclude arming the opposition or using military force to arrive at the “tipping point”. The Congressional Research Service concluded that unrest in Syria would have a marked effect

---

<sup>344</sup>Robert S. Ford, “Crisis in Syria: The US Response,” *U.S. Department of State*, March 20, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2013/206455.htm>

<sup>345</sup>Ibid

<sup>346</sup>Elizabeth Jones, “US Policy towards Syria,” *U.S. Department of State*, April 11, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2013/207416.htm>

<sup>347</sup>John Alterman, “Bad Options and Hard Choices in Syria policy,” *US House Committee on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2013, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20130605/100938/HHRG-113-FA13-Wstate-AltermanJ-20130605.pdf>



on US national interests and that both a continued conflict and regime change would reshape the influence of regional and international players in the country.

*The prospect of regime change in Damascus or prolonged instability in Syria could fundamentally alter the calculations and relative influence of competing actors, particularly Iran, the Arab Gulf states, Turkey, Israel, the United States, and global powers like Russia and China. Implications for U.S. national interests could be dramatic, depending on whether the Assad regime survives, chaos ensues, or a more stable new order emerges.*<sup>348</sup>

If the conflict escalates and the flow of refugees spiraled, the crisis would risk a spillover into neighboring countries, endanger the stability of key US allies like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey and strengthen the hands of already burgeoning non-state actors. The future of Syria's chemical stockpile raised also serious questions, especially if controlled by groups hostile to the U.S. presence and interests in the region. As for Israel, US closest ally, the report noted that the prospect of regime change held both threats and promises to its security. While a new secular or Sunni government might curb Iran's influence in the country, it might also take a hard-line position regarding the occupied Golden Heights or the Israeli-Palestinian issue.<sup>349</sup>

The White House, however, denied any intentions to "militarize the conflict," whether by arming the opposition or through military intervention, and put forward a number of reasons for such policy. In an interview with Fareed Zakaria in February 2012, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dempsey contended that "it's premature to take a decision to arm the opposition movement in Syria because I would challenge anyone to clearly identify for me the opposition movement in Syria at this point" He also argued that many external powers, namely Russia, Iran and Turkey, have critical stakes in Syria and that many armed groups are active in the conflict on the basis of Sunni-Shia rivalry for regional influence.<sup>350</sup>

Arming the opposition also carries the risk that military supplies would either go missing or fall in the hands of groups hostile to the US and its interests. The experience of Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates, according to John Alterman, that the argument of arming groups to win their loyalty is not well-founded because "political agendas quickly replace any ties of

---

<sup>348</sup>Christopher M. Blanchard and al, "Change in the Middle East: Implications for US Policy," CRS, March 7, 2012, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42393.pdf>, 10.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Martin E. Dempsey, "Interview with Fareed Zakaria for "GPS" (CNN)," *Joint Chiefs of Staff*, February 19, 2012, <http://www.jcs.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/571847/gen-dempseys-interview-with-fareed-zakaria-for-gps-cnn/>



gratitude or loyalty to the United States.” In the Syrian case, both the political and the armed opposition were divided along lines that reflect the preferences of their respective donors.<sup>351</sup>

In defense of his policy choices, President Obama claimed that taking military action unilaterally is a mistake and an option that “hasn’t been true in the past and it won’t be true now.” For those who think of Syria as another Libya, the president replied that while in Libya the US had the full mandate of the Security Council and the Arab League, and a reliable assessment that the operation would be conducted swiftly and effectively, Syrian is “a much more complicated situation.”<sup>352</sup> Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta acknowledged that there was no “clear and unambiguous way forward to directly influence the events in Syria,” especially with the absence of an international consensus or a united opposition front. Panetta cited Secretary Clinton warning that “there is every possibility of a civil war [in Syria], and an outside intervention in these conditions would not prevent that, but could expedite it and make it worse”<sup>353</sup>

At the military level, General Dempsey concluded that Syria is “a very different challenge.” because the Syrian army is “very capable....have a very sophisticated integrated air defense system... and chemical and biological weapons.”<sup>354</sup> In his testimony before the Armed Services Committee, he elaborated more on the Syrian defense system and stated that it is “5 times the air defense of Libya, covering one-fifth of the terrain, and about 10 times more than we experienced in Serbia.” Besides, Dempsey contends that Syria should not be thought of as a “soda straw” issue because “it doesn’t exist as an individual, isolated country. It’s in the context of the region. It’s in the context even of actors outside the region.” The inside context, moreover, “is a far different demographic, ethnic, religious mix than it was in Libya.”<sup>355</sup>

In a letter to the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee in July 2013, General Dempsey provided a more detailed account on the risks and costs of every possible military option and called for a comprehensive approach that includes political solutions. The *New York Times* described the letter as “the first time the military has explicitly described what it

---

<sup>351</sup> Alterman, *Bad Options*

<sup>352</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Press Conference by the President,” *the White House*, March 6, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/press-conference-president>

<sup>353</sup> Leon Panetta, “Submitted Statement on Syria,” *Senate Armed Services Committee*, March 7, 2012, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Panetta%2003-07-121.pdf>

<sup>354</sup> Dempsey, *Interview*

<sup>355</sup> “The Situation in Syria: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services US Senate,” *US Government Printing Office*, March 7, 2012, p20, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg76271/pdf/CHRG-112shrg76271.pdf>

sees as formidable challenge of intervening in the war.” Dempsey warned that if the US intervenes, it “should be prepared for what comes next” because “deeper involvement is hard to avoid.”<sup>356</sup> This conclusion stems from the US experience in the last 10 years, mainly in Iraq and Afghanistan, which demonstrates that tipping the military balance is not the end-all without laying the groundwork for “a functioning state.” In case “the regime’s institutions collapse in the absence of a viable opposition,” the United States would “inadvertently empower extremists or unleash the very chemical weapons we seek to control.”<sup>357</sup> While some construe the letter an appeal to help build a viable opposition, Dempsey’s admission that Assad would not fall anytime soon is a call to support, or at least accept, the status quo, rather than embarking on unpredictable ventures.

Dempsey’s warning of deeper involvement is also evident in the risks and costs he underlined for every possible military option. Training and assisting the opposition would require “several hundred to several thousand troops” and cost “\$500 million per year initially,” with the risk of the “extremists gaining access to additional capabilities.” Targeted strikes of the Syrian regime’s military capabilities need “hundreds of aircraft, ships, submarines, and other enablers” with the cost “in the billions.” A no-fly zone also requires hundreds of aircrafts and an initial budget of \$500 million, with subsequent one billion dollar every month. A buffer zone would involve thousands of troops and cost a billion dollar each month. Destroying Syria’s chemical weapons would be the most expensive alternative because it involves all the above-mentioned options with the possible outcome being the “control of some, but not all chemical weapons.”<sup>358</sup>

Anthony Cordesman argues that Dempsey’s assessment focuses exclusively on the costs of US action and ignores the costs of inaction, which made a unified Arab stance harder, intensified conspiracy theories against the US, and gave the extremist factions of the opposition the momentum in the conflict. He also contends that all the options are presented in a way that the US is the only bearer of the cost, disregarding the role its regional allies could possibly play. With the war fatigue, a restrained military budget, and a decade of military deployments, US policy makers should keep “military interventions limited, work

---

<sup>356</sup>Martin Landler and Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Lays out Options for US Military Effort in Syria,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/pentagon-outl...options-to-congress-suggests-syria-campaign-would-be-costly.html>

<sup>357</sup> Martin Dempsey quoted in Anthony H. Cordesman, “US Options in Syria, the Dempsey Letter,” *CSIS*, July 16, 2013, 2013, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-options-syria-dempsey-letter>

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

with partners, and rely on local forces,” and when core national interests call for action, the US has to “make it clear to its allies that they must do their share.”<sup>359</sup>

### **2-3 The False Promise of the “Red Line”**

Obama’s resistance to military intervention, however, was not without exceptions. In a press conference in August 2012 he was asked about the possibility of military intervention to ensure the safety of Syria’s chemical weapons and his response was unequivocal. Obama stated sending a clear message to all players in Syria, especially the government, that the use of such weapons is a “red line” that would change his “calculus” and “equation,” asserting that he communicated this message “in no uncertain terms” and that the violation of the “red line” would have “enormous consequences.”<sup>360</sup> In August 30, 2013, an official government assessment based on “multiple streams of intelligence” and “substantial body of information” concluded that a chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government took place in the suburbs of Damascus.<sup>361</sup>

Secretary of State John Kerry described the findings as “common sense,” “evidence” and “facts” which are “as clear as they are compelling,” urging the American people to read the evidence “from thousands of sources.” The question for Kerry was not what the US government knew but rather what it would do. In a unilateral stance reminiscent of the Bush Doctrine, Kerry concluded that “by the definition of their own mandate, the UN can’t tell us anything that we haven’t shared with you” and because the Russian possible veto for any UN authorization to use force, “the UN cannot galvanize the world to act as it should.” Therefore, the US president would “ensure that the United States of America makes our own decisions on our own timelines on our own values and our own interests.”<sup>362</sup> In a letter published in *The New York Times*, the Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that any decision relating to matters of war and peace must be based on an international consensus through the UN Security Council. He added that it is “alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts

---

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” *the White House*, August 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>

<sup>361</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August, 21, 2013,” *the White House*, August 30, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30...nt-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>

<sup>362</sup> John Kerry, “Statement on Syria,” *U.S. Department of State*, August 30, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm>

in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States” and that it is “extremely dangerous” that the US perceives itself as an exceptional power for “whatever motivation.”<sup>363</sup>

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, the US president announced his decision of a military action against Syria and categorized the chemical incident as a danger to US national security and its allies in the region. In an attempt to comfort a war-weary public and opposition, he asserted that the action would “not be an open-ended intervention” with “no boots on the ground” and “designed to be limited in scope and duration.” But despite his position as a commander in chief, Obama chose to refer the decision to a vote in Congress arguing that it would make the country stronger and its actions more effective. While Obama showed high regard for Congress, he expressed confidence and comfort for “going forward without the approval of a United Nations Security Council that, so far, has been completely paralyzed and unwilling to hold Assad accountable.”<sup>364</sup>

While some critics see Obama’s move to seek congressional authorization as a sign of a healthy and a functioning democracy, others believe it was a way for him to get out from a dilemma in which he was trapped. Andrew Bacevich contends that Obama “was looking for a way to not have to make good on the threat that he had made” because “he had no appetite for direct military engagement in Syria.”<sup>365</sup> The argument that this move meant to marshal political support is unfounded because the president had all the constitutional power to move on, Congress was likely to oppose the decision and the preparations for a military action were already underway.<sup>366</sup> As he clearly demonstrated in his address, the President was unwilling to bear the responsibility of a military action and its aftermath, especially if things went wrong or not as planned. “All of us should be accountable as we move forward,” he noted, “and that can only be accomplished by a vote.”<sup>367</sup>

With a divided administration, a mostly undecided Congress, and a lack of support from allies, especially the UK whose parliament rejected military action, Obama was relieved to see a diplomatic opening that spared him an unpopular decision. In an address to the nation on September 10, 2013, Obama asked Congress to delay the vote to proceed with a Russian

---

<sup>363</sup> Vladimir V. Putin, “A Plea for Caution from Russia,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>

<sup>364</sup> “Text of President Obama’s Remarks on Syria,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/world/middleeast/text-of-president-obamas-remarks-on-syria.html>

<sup>365</sup> Andrew Bacevich quoted in Patrice Taddonio, “‘The President Blinked’: Why Obama Changed Course on the ‘Red Line’ in Syria,” *Frontline*, May 25, 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-president-blinked-why-obama-changed-course-on-the-red-line-in-syria/>

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> *President Obama’s Remarks on Syria*

proposal by which Assad would relinquish his chemical weapons to avoid US military action. He explained that thanks to “the credible threat of US military action” the Assad regime has shown willingness to give up its chemical weapons. Because of Russia’s support, this initiative “had the potential to remove the threat of chemical weapons without the use of force.”<sup>368</sup> Eventually, the president abandoned both the option of using force and seeking congressional authorization to do so. While the proposal was Russian, it was first initiated by John Kerry when asked what Assad could do to avoid US attack and he replied: “he could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons.”<sup>369</sup>

Obama was both praised and censured for his decision, which was made against the advice of even senior administration officials and his close advisers. Derek Chollet, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, argues that Assad’s decision to relinquish chemical weapons is a living example of the efficacy of “coercive diplomacy.” He also downplays the argument that the use of force could have addressed the chemical weapons question or resolved the Syrian conflict.<sup>370</sup> Although the former secretaries of defense, Robert Gates and Leon Panetta disagree on the viability of military force, they both agree that going to Congress was the wrong decision. Gates commented that launching airstrikes would present the US as an aggressor, add fuel to a fire raging in the region and result in “unintended consequences.” Panetta concluded that when the President of a country like the US draws a red line, the credibility of the country depends on making good on his words.<sup>371</sup>

In retrospect, Obama took pride in a decision he thought broke with the American foreign policy establishment and what he called the “Washington playbook,” which seeks militarized responses to political problems. On the issue of “credibility,” he commented that “dropping bombs on someone to prove that you are willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force.”<sup>372</sup> Geoffrey Gulberg concluded the president believed he was

---

<sup>368</sup>Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Syria,” *the American Presidency Project*, September 10, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-situation-syria>

<sup>369</sup> Arshad Mohammed and Andrew Osborn, “Kerry: Syrian Surrender of Chemical Arms Could Stop US Attacks,” *Reuters*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-kerry/kerry-syrian-surrender-of-chemical-arms-could-stop-u-s-attack-idUSBRE9880BV20130909>

<sup>370</sup> Derek Chollet, “Obama’s Red Line Revisited,” *Politico*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059>

<sup>371</sup> Thomas Shanker and Lauren D’Acolio, “Former Defense Secretaries Criticize Obama on Syria,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/19/world/middleeast/gates-and-panetta-critical-of-obama-on-syria.html>

<sup>372</sup>Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

walking into a trap “laid both by allies and by adversaries, and by conventional expectations of what an American president is supposed to do.”<sup>373</sup>

Critics, however, found it ironic that the debate centered on the wisdom of reacting with force to the use of chemical weapons and not on the long and extensive employment of conventional force and its ramifications of human suffering. Musa Al-Gharbi notes that the occurrence of a chemical incident when the rebels were in desperate need for foreign intervention strongly suggests that “policy is informing the administration’s evaluation of intelligence, rather than having the intelligence guide its policies.” Because Obama did not make toppling Assad an objective of his military option and as the “right guys” according to the US were unlikely to win, the objective became the prevention of anybody from winning, thus maintaining a stalemated conflict where Assad and his allies and el Qaeda forces are “too consumed by the conflict with one-another to pose a meaningful threat to the West, its allies, or its interests.”<sup>374</sup>

As the conflict stalemated, Obama’s priorities and objectives in the region changed remarkably. Demands for Assad to step down became less frequent as he became a de facto player in any transitional government or negotiated settlement.<sup>375</sup> The Syrian opposition favorable to the west continued to lose ground and the Syrian government forces, thanks to an extensive support from Russia, Iran and Shia militias, gained momentum. The administration’s critics highlight what they see as Obama’s “abandonment” and “retreat” which aided the Syrian government, disgraced the nationalist opposition, empowered the “Islamists” and created a vacuum that was filled by Russia, Iran and their allied non-state actors.<sup>376</sup>

America’s failure, critics contend, became its adversaries’ success, especially el Qaeda which became a redeemer of choice for the Syrian population living in territories controlled by the opposition. What started as a local problem, argues Charles Lister, escalated into an international one thanks to “US indecision, risk aversion, a total divergence between rhetoric and policy, and the failure to uphold clearly stated ‘red lines’” The unifying theme of this line

---

<sup>373</sup> Ibid

<sup>374</sup> Musa Al-Gharbi, “Red Line Drawn with Syrian Blood,” *Counterpunch*, August 29, 2013, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/29/red-lines-drawn-with-syrian-blood/>

<sup>375</sup> Carol E. Lee, Gordon Lubold and Adam Antous, “Obama’s Options Narrow in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/obamas-options-narrow-in-syria-1444438099>

<sup>376</sup> Muhammad Idrees Ahmed, “Barack Obama’s presidency will be defined by his failure to face down Assad,” *The Guardian*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/17/obama-presidency-defined-failure-face-down-assad-syria>



of argument is Obama's tendency to see and deal with the Syrian crisis "through the lens of counterterrorism."<sup>377</sup>

This tendency was clear in Obama's stated strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the group known as ISIS, asserting that the operation would never be of the scale of the Iraq war. In a speech to the nation on September 11, 2014 he explained that this strategy comprised of a campaign of airstrikes by the US and its allies and the support of local forces on the ground in Iraq and Syria, but he ruled out any combat mission of US troops deployed to train and assist these forces. While he made no reference to targeting Assad forces, Obama denied any possible coordination with them in his strategy.<sup>378</sup> Implicitly, however, the US and the Syrian government ended up fighting a common adversary, a revealing symptom of the complexity of the Syrian conflict.

Michael Doran contends that "keeping the Middle East at arm's length remains the defining feature" of Obama's policy. President Obama the example of Eisenhower during the Vietnam war, that is, "setting out the conditions for American involvement in such a way so as to ensure it did not happen" The word "ultimately" in Obama strategy denotes that "the method he adopted -airstrikes- will not do the job" thus leaving the decisive stage of the war to the next administration.<sup>379</sup>

Despite its limited objectives and involvement, the strategy continued to face serious setbacks. The termination of the Train and Equip program in October 2015 is but one example. Initiated by the end of 2014, it meant to build a fighting force of more than five thousand fighters in the first year and fifteen thousand in the subsequent three years to combat ISIS. Rejecting its objective to fight ISIS exclusively, rebels refused to join the program which, according to Pentagon revelations, counted three or four trainees at some point in the month preceding its closure. Undersecretary of defense for policy Christine E. Wormuth commented that "there are many, many individuals in Syria who wants to fight the

---

<sup>377</sup> Charles Lister, "Obama's Syria Strategy is the Definition of Insanity," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/21/obamas-syria-strategy-is-the-definition-of-insanity/>

<sup>378</sup> "Transcript: President Obama's Speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism," *CNN*, September 11, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/index.html>

<sup>379</sup> Michael Doran, "Obama Embraces Military Intervention in Iraq and Syria—Reluctantly," *Brookings*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/09/11/obama-embraces-military-intervention-in-iraq-and-syria-reluctantly/#cancel>

regime [and] we were focused on identifying individuals who wanted to fight ISIL. And that's a pretty challenging recruiting mission."<sup>380</sup>

That Obama was dealing with the symptoms of the problem instead of its root causes has been a core argument of the critics of this policy.<sup>381</sup> The strategy was further compounded by Russia's growing military presence and its air campaign. While its stated objective was to target "terrorism," the Pentagon communicated that 90 percent of the Russian airstrikes targeted "moderate" Syrian opposition fighting Assad forces and supported by the U.S. John Kirby, the US Defense Department Spokesman, said that "whether they're hit by a cruise missile from the sea or a bomb from a Russian military aircraft, the result is the same, that Assad continues to get support from Russia."<sup>382</sup>

Meanwhile, Obama's guiding principle continued to be the resistance of deeper involvement in the conflict to avoid unwanted escalation with the Russians. In an interview with BBC nine months before he left office, Obama concluded that it would be impossible to defeat ISIS in his presidency and considered it a mistake for the United States or its ally Britain "to send in ground troops and overthrow the Assad regime." Describing it as "a heart-breaking situation with enormous complexity," Obama foreclosed any military solution to the problem, evidently not one led by his administration.<sup>383</sup>

The disparity between Obama's Syria policy objectives and the means assigned to achieve them is revealing of the president's devotion to the principle of avoiding costly commitments if American core interests are not threatened. But even when he categorized the use of the chemical weapons a threat to his country's national interests and allies in the region, the commander in chief turned to Congress to share in the responsibility of a military venture, according to his apologists, or to find a way out of a commitment he made but was loathe to bear its costs and its unforeseen consequences. When he finally realized that his country could not help but get yet again military entangled to preserve the liberal international order, the president relied on less unpopular and low cost alternatives.

---

<sup>380</sup> Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS," *New York Times*, October 9, 2015,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>

<sup>381</sup> Adam Garfinkle, "Putin, Obama and the Middle East," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October, 2015,

[https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194055/garfinkle\\_-\\_putin\\_obama\\_and\\_the\\_me.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194055/garfinkle_-_putin_obama_and_the_me.pdf)

<sup>382</sup> "'More than 90%' of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted ISIS, US says" *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targeting-isis>

<sup>383</sup> "Syria conflict: Obama rules out ground troops for Syria," *BBC*, April 24, 2016,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36121135>



### **3- Airstrikes, Drones and Surrogate War: Low-Cost Courses of Intervention**

The reliance on regional allies and local forces to take up or share in the burden of military operations is a key strategy of retrenching states. In a complex regional environment, the absence of direct threats to US national interests, a strained military budget and a war-weary American public, the Obama administration turned to less direct and low-cost alternatives to influence events in the region.

A significant alternative to direct military intervention is what is termed “surrogate war” which “describes a patron’s externalization, partly or wholly, of the strategic, operational and tactical burden of warfare to a human or technological surrogate.” Unlike in proxy wars where the proxy substitute the patron, in surrogate wars a state, a non-state actor like revolutionary groups, contractors, or mercenaries act rather as “a force multiplier.” Surrogates are not limited to human entities but extend to apparatuses like unmanned combat aerial vehicles (CUAV).<sup>384</sup>

The National Military Strategy of 2011 is a hallmark of a new direction in the U.S. military doctrine which emphasizes a more burden-sharing approach to military operations. The strategy highlighted the building of stronger ties with American allies and the creation of “opportunities of partnership with new and diverse groups of actors.” In a changing and complex environment, the strategy called also for the employment of “a full spectrum of military capabilities and attributes... to prevent and win our Nation’s wars.”<sup>385</sup> The military campaign against ISIS in particular and Obama’s Syria policy in general was a case in point to put this military strategy into practice, where regional allies, local forces, and an air campaign of manned and unmanned aircrafts were employed to achieve policy objectives.

While some critics argue that such campaign is but a continuation of the Bush administration’s militaristic approach, others advance that it is revealing of Obama’s strategy of retrenchment. Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph Parent argue that despite the military campaign against ISIS, “retrenchment remains the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy”

---

<sup>384</sup> Andreas Krieg, “Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East,” *International Affairs* **92**: 1 (2016): 98-99

<sup>385</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff, “The National Military Strategy of the United States of America,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, February 8, 2011, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS\\_2018\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy\\_Description.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS_2018_National_Military_Strategy_Description.pdf)

and that the tools, both diplomatic and military, of this campaign “are cribbed straight from the retrenchment handbook,” which consist of “a modest counterterrorism campaign with a light military footprint and a heavier reliance on regional partners.” In a broader historical context, Obama relied “on the same measures the retrenching states have used to fight brushfires for centuries – measures that emphasis frugality and flexibility.”<sup>386</sup>

### **3-1 The Syrian Opposition: Support by Proxies**

While the Obama administration rejected direct military involvement in the Syrian conflict, it embraced and sometimes coordinated the provision of financial and military aid to the Syrian opposition through its allies in the region. In the military campaign against ISIS, these states also participated directly with their own air forces, military bases, intelligence sharing and funding. Local forces in Iraq and Syria were in the frontline of the fight, while the role of American troops was confined to training and support missions.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar were the forerunners to provide diplomatic, financial and even military support to the Syrian opposition. In June 2012 Reuters reported the two countries providing salaries to rebel forces since the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April through a Turkish-based organization. The aim of the agreement was to encourage as many defections from the Syrian army, help organize the opposition forces, and prevent the influence of “extremist organizations”<sup>387</sup> The effort was also seen as a covert channel to pay for arms supplies.<sup>388</sup>

When Turkey led in the creation of the Syrian National Council in August 2011, Qatar helped finance it. Comprising of councils that represent different provinces in Syria, the council received \$8million of Qatari aid. As the opposition body was heavily dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, it was soon forsaken by its secular members. Under the auspices of the United States, Qatar took the lead in the formation of a broader political umbrella called the National Coalition in November 2012 and provided \$20 million for its budget.<sup>389</sup>

---

<sup>386</sup>Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph Parent, “The Retrenchment War,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2014-09-24/retrenchment-war>

<sup>387</sup> “Saudi Arabia and Qatar Funding Syrian Rebels,” *Reuters*, June 23, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi/saudi-arabia-and-qatar-funding-syrian-rebels-idUSBRE85M07820120623>

<sup>388</sup> Ian Black and Julian Borger, “Gulf states warned against arming Syrian rebels,” *Guardian*, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/05/gulf-states-warning-arming-syria>

<sup>389</sup>Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, “How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution,” *The Financial Times Magazine*, May 17, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de>

Qatar also relied on Turkish intelligence and Syrian Brotherhood members in the diaspora to vet potential rebel recipients of arms supplies. Encouraged by its experience of helping the rebels in Libya, Doha purchased arms from Libya and Eastern Europe and transported them to Turkey whose intelligence then helped smuggle them into Syria. Between April 2012 and March 2013, about 70 shipments were sent by Qatar to Turkey according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Qatar even sent its special forces and opened two operation rooms in Ankara and Istanbul to coordinate and supervise these deliveries.<sup>390</sup>

Despite the divergence in policy preferences between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other, the three countries concerted their efforts through what was described as a “nerve center” in Adana, 100 km away from the Syrian borders. The effort was also seen as a reaction to the US rejection of direct involvement to redirect the conflict’s trajectory in Syria. What was described as a Doha-based source by *Reuters* reported that the coordination between the three countries took the form of a “triangle” with Turkey at the top with full military control and Qatar and Saudi Arabia providing the supplies and paying for them. The source also described an “American hands off” approach to the effort, with US intelligence working only through middlemen to control access and routes to stockpiles.<sup>391</sup>

While official Washington continued to resist the provision of lethal aid to the rebels, the Syrian opposition and US officials confirmed partial American coordination of the Gulf states’ efforts to arm the forces fighting Assad. The U.S. increased its contact with these forces and provided its Gulf allies with “assessments of rebel credibility and command-and-control infrastructure.” Opposition forces in Syria also confirmed that they were “in direct contact with State Department officials to designate worthy rebel recipients of arms and pinpoint locations for stockpiles.”<sup>392</sup>

Saudi Arabia in particular took a leading role to influence events in Syria. In an attempt to strengthen the Syrian opposition of choice and weaken el Qaeda and its affiliates, argues Frederic Wehrey, the Kingdom provided both training and advanced arms. To do so, it “set up a joint Saudi, Qatari, and Turkish operations room in Istanbul, channeled funds through intermediaries in Lebanon’s Future Movement, coordinated military training with Jordan,

---

<sup>390</sup>Ibid.

<sup>391</sup>Regan Doherty and Amena Bakr, “Exclusive: secret Turkish nerve center leads aid to Syria rebels,” *Reuters*, July 27, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-centre/exclusive-s...rkish-nerve-center-leads-aid-to-syria-rebels-idUSBRE86Q0JM20120727>

<sup>392</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbors money, U.S. Coordination,” *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-reb...05/15/gIQAds2TSU\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.7253406f311c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-reb...05/15/gIQAds2TSU_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7253406f311c)

brokered arms shipments from Croatia, and reportedly solicited Pakistan's assistance in training." <sup>393</sup>

Saudi-American efforts in Syria were not very concerted in the first two years of the conflict thanks to a divergence in objectives and policy priorities, but saw greater alignment by the beginning of 2014. While Saudi Arabia had little faith in the diplomatic track and made the toppling of President Assad a priority, the U.S. invested in diplomacy and avoided military involvement lest it would hamper the nuclear talks with Tehran. With the growing influence of ISIS and el Qaeda on the Syrian battlefields, officials in Tehran and Riyadh joined forces to confront a common adversary. The appointment of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, a longtime ally of Washington in counterterrorism, as head of the Saudi intelligence augured further cooperation and a stronger alliance. <sup>394</sup>

The little known CIA covert operation, code-named Operation Timber Sycamore, is revealing of the Saudi-American cooperation in Syria. While CIA operatives provided the training, the Saudi intelligence provided money and weapons worth "several billion dollars." Run simultaneously with another program designed to fight ISIS, Timber Sycamore reportedly focused on training and arming the rebels fighting Assad. Jordan provided the primary site for training and Qatar made the military base that stations U.S. troops available for use. <sup>395</sup> While U.S. allies embraced the program as a positive policy change in the Obama administration, officials in Washington believe it would have little effect given the constraints imposed on the CIA, its resources, and its activities. <sup>396</sup>

In July 2017, the Trump administration brought the program to its end after Jordan and Turkey ceased their cooperation and Russia escalated air raids against the US-trained rebels, thus rendering the project ineffective. Concerned that the Russian strikes would increase the flow of refugees to its borders, Jordan came to a ceasefire agreement with the Syrian government in September 2015 and pressed the rebels to stop fighting Assad forces and concentrated on targeting ISIS. In the same manner, Turkey abandoned the program and

---

<sup>393</sup> Frederic Wehrey, "Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/gulf-calculations-in-syrian-conflict-pub-55865>

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

<sup>395</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels," *New York Times*, January 23, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html>

<sup>396</sup> Greg Miller, "CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-rampi...84-2af6-11e3-8ade-a1f23cdal35e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e283417960c5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-rampi...84-2af6-11e3-8ade-a1f23cdal35e_story.html?utm_term=.e283417960c5)

embraced a rapprochement approach with Russia, a move that spared Ankara the effort of regime change to concentrate on fighting the Kurdish forces on its borders.<sup>397</sup>

### **3-2 A Burden-sharing Approach to the War on ISIS**

In the campaign against ISIS, Obama made the involvement of states in the region to share in the cost and responsibilities of the operation the backbone of his military strategy. “This is not our fight alone,” he announced, “American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for the Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.” This approach is within a larger strategy to defend American interests with mobilizing partners to “address broader challenges to international order.” Because the fight was in the Middle East, Obama urged Arab states to mobilize the Sunni communities both in Iraq and Syria to confront ISIS.<sup>398</sup>

The international coalition that was formed to undertake this mission in September 2014 comprised 66 nations worldwide with 7 countries from the region including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirate (UAE), with twelve countries leading the military operations. According to the Congressional Research Service, “the philosophy underpinning the campaign appears to be that fighting the Islamic State requires a long-term campaign for which Iraqis and their neighbors should take the lead” while the US and its allies “focus on supporting Iraqis, Syrians, and others rather than taking on significant ground combat roles themselves.”<sup>399</sup>

Though all the participating countries in the region contributed in a way or another to the coalition, Turkey and the UAE were by far the frontrunners. The Turkish government gave permission to the coalition forces to use its airspace and military bases as a launching pad from mid 2015 and participated with its own air force in the air strikes.<sup>400</sup> Independently from the coalition operations, Turkey sent “hundreds” of its troops to the north of Iraq in late 2015 to train and assist Iraqi forces.<sup>401</sup>

Through an on-site visit and meetings with Emirati officials, *the Washington Post* reported that the Dhafra airbase in the UAE was used to launch “more strike aircraft than any other

---

<sup>397</sup> Fabrice Balanche, “The End of the CIA Program in Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-08-02/end-cia-program-syria>

<sup>398</sup> *Obama’s Speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism*

<sup>399</sup> Kathleen J. McInnis, “Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State,” *CRS*, August 14, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid*, p12.

military facility in the region.” The UAE also participated with its own F16 jets and “conducted more missions against the Islamic State since the air war began than any other member of the multinational coalition.” Prior to the beginning of the campaign, the Emiratis were presented with a list of targets to undertake but they objected that they wanted, and could do, more. As one U.S. officer attending the meeting commented, “they wanted to hit more aggressive targets and provide more airplanes. They offered more than we were asking.” The UAE even received its own nickname in the alliance with the U.S., “Little Sparta.”<sup>402</sup>

Jordan also participated with its own airplanes in the first few months of the campaign and intensified its activities and expanded them into Iraq after its pilot was burned to death by ISIS. Aman has also been a source of intelligence to the CIA, stationed US Special Forces and provided support to the Syrian rebels in the south.<sup>403</sup> Other Gulf States like Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar also contributed aircrafts, with the latter providing a military base that stations coalition forces. Saudi Arabia on its part funded a \$3 billion military equipment program for Lebanon and provided \$500 million of humanitarian aid to Iraq.<sup>404</sup>

Mobilizing regional partners was not only a political selling point to comfort an increasingly disengaged American public, but also a way to bring the best in every player to contribute. For a president who came to office with a promise to end wars, it would be highly unpopular to undertake a unilateral practice he continuously criticized. Moreover, other countries contributed what would be very costly if provided by the U.S. alone; Britain and Australia helped with expertise, Jordan delivered the intelligence and Saudi Arabia the money.<sup>405</sup>

### **3-3 Local Forces in the Frontlines**

Marshalling local forces in Iraq and Syria was an integral part of Obama’s strategy to externalize the burden of war. While he continued to distinguish the campaign against ISIS from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which involved large numbers of American ground troops, Obama explained that this war was a “counterterrorism campaign” that would be

---

<sup>402</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed ‘Little Sparta,’” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-ua...c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f6aeac18bd34](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-ua...c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html?utm_term=.f6aeac18bd34)

<sup>403</sup> Priyanka Boghani, “Who’s Who in the Fight against ISIS,” *Frontline*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/whos-who-in-the-fight-against-isis/>

<sup>404</sup> Justine Drennan, “Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition against the Islamic State,” *Foreign Policy*, November 12, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/12/who-has-contributed-what-in-the-coalition-against-the-islamic-state/>

<sup>405</sup> Helene Cooper, “Obama Enlist 9 Allies to Help in the Battle against ISIS,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/06/world/middleeast/us-and-allies-form-coalition-against-isis.html>



waged through “using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground.”<sup>406</sup> This strategy would “achieve a more sustainable victory” and would not require “sending a new generation of American overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil.”<sup>407</sup>

In an interview with the BBC, John Allen, the presidential envoy for the global coalition to fight ISIL, reiterated the same argument when he was questioned how western forces could defeat ISIS without deploying troops on the ground. He explained that relying on indigenous forces “works much better at the end” because when western troops take the lead in fighting a war on a large scale “the outcome is almost always that you create as much instability as a result of that as you do accomplish your tactical objectives.”<sup>408</sup>

From the beginning of the campaign, the Obama administration adopted an Iraq-first strategy that coordinated an air campaign with the Iraqis and aimed to train and equip the Iraqi forces. The United States along with its European and Gulf allies refrained from using their own ground forces in the campaign and limited the role of their forces to training and consultancy missions. According to US military officials, this practice, represents “a significant departure from training and mentoring models over the past decade and beyond, whereby military teams partnered and performed offensive operations with their local Iraqi counterparts” The added value of such strategy is to enable the Iraqi forces to take on the bulk of responsibility and thus become a better-trained and a more capable fighting force.<sup>409</sup>

By the spring of 2018 Pentagon officials reported the training of 138000 Iraqi troops which included Iraqi security forces, the Iraqi police, the Kurdish Peshmerga and even Sunni tribal forces. The White House also created the Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) which contributed more than \$1.5 billion in FY2015 and \$715 million in FY2016.<sup>410</sup> Despite more than a decade of U.S. efforts to help form a reliable Iraqi army, the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF), a set of Shia militias created by the religious decree of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, were the most effective force that helped serve U.S. objectives. In a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, general Olson confidently reported that Iraqi

---

<sup>406</sup>Obama’s Speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism

<sup>407</sup>“Full Text of Obama Speech on National Security, Threat of Terrorism,” *Reuters*, December 7, 2015, <https://br.reuters.com/article/us-california-shooting-obama-address-tex-idUKKBN0TQ09A20151207>

<sup>408</sup> “Interview with Quentin Sommerville, BBC” *U.S. Department of State*, September 13, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/seci/246849.htm>

<sup>409</sup> Kathleen J. McNis, “The Addition of Trainers to Iraq: Background for Congress,” *CRS*, June 16, 2015, pp 3-4, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44073.pdf>

<sup>410</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, “The Islamic State and U.S. Policy,” *CRS*, September 15, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf>

Kurdish forces numbered 90,000, the PMF 80,000, but was far less certain that the Iraqi security forces were upwards between 10,000 and 80,000.<sup>411</sup>

Kurdish-controlled areas were used as bases for military training and in 2016 the Pentagon, with Iraqi government consent, allocated \$400 million of aid to Peshmerga forces for salaries and food. The National Defense Authorization Act of FY2016 forced the appropriation of 25% of the fund allocated to train Iraq forces to aid the Kurds even without notice to, or coordination with, the central government. The act also gave the president the power to directly assist and arm Peshmerga forces if the Iraqi central government failed to attend to Kurdish demands or to their political and military integration.<sup>412</sup> The U.S. thus became a de facto patron of Iraqi Kurdistan exercising more sway on its policies than the Iraqi government.

In Iraq the U.S. ended up working hand in hand with Iran to advance a common cause. The Iran-backed and Shia-dominated PMF played a key role in the counteroffensive against ISIS thanks to U.S. air cover. General John Allen testified that the PMF “has played the role ultimately of blunting and halting the forward progress of Daesh.” In Tikrit, where these forces took credit of “liberation”, Allen attested that “there seems to have been some organizational support to the Shia elements in the Popular Mobilization Force, potentially some direct support as well.”<sup>413</sup> When he was asked how would the U.S. fight in the same battle with Iranian-backed militias and tolerate their presence, while in Syria the same militias were supporting Assad, Allen replied: “It’s a very complex situation and each of those areas carries its own unique characteristics.”<sup>414</sup>

In Syria, the failure of the Train and Equip program to attract participants and to reach its stated objectives led to its orientation to support loyal and already active militants. Like in Iraq, the Syrian Kurds were the partner of choice for the United States thanks to their effectiveness, organization and cohesion.<sup>415</sup> The primary Syrian Kurdish partner was the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The latter helped form a broader coalition that included Arab and Christian groups known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which became the main recipient of U.S. arms and training in Syria. The Pentagon’s strategy was to help

---

<sup>411</sup> “Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives,” *U.S. Government Publishing Office*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/>

<sup>412</sup> “Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State,” *CRS*, December 28, 2016, pp 4-8, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44513/7>

<sup>413</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives*

<sup>414</sup> *Interview with Quentin Sommerville*

<sup>415</sup> *Kurds in Iraq and Syria*



strengthen the non-Kurdish factions in this coalition so as to avoid alienating its ally in Ankara and as these factions would be better suited to fight and administer non-Kurdish territories.<sup>416</sup>

In practice, President Obama authorized the deployment of 50 special forces to Syria by the end of 2015, 250 additional troops in April 2016, and other 200 special forces in December 2016, all with the stated objective of providing training and logistical support to U.S. partners on the ground.<sup>417</sup> Congress also approved the appropriation of \$567 million in FY 2015, \$416 million in FY2016, and \$270 million in FY2017 for the Syrian Train and Equip program.<sup>418</sup> U.S. reliance on the Kurds seemed to bear fruits as the YPG claimed control of Koubani in January 2015 and of Tel Abyad in July 2015. The newly formed SDF could also claim sway on Manjeb in August 2016, El Tabaqa in May 2017, and ISIS stronghold of Raqqa in October 2017.<sup>419</sup>

At the military level and from the Pentagon's point of view, the U.S. strategy in Iraq and Syria represents a departure from the previous administration's policy and is revealing of the merits of relying on local forces to achieve policy objectives. In a series of interviews and meetings with Pentagon officials, Kevin Baron concluded that the unifying call of all these bureaucrats was to avoid to "own this fight" and urge the Iraqi government to take the lead in the provision and maintenance of security; "they don't want to defeat ISIS only to become an occupying force of sitting ducks."<sup>420</sup>

What Pentagon officials describe as a strategy "by, with and through" local forces has proved to be not only more effective, but also "less costly, and a less deadly way to victory." Colonel J. R. Treharne, the commander of the Coalition center in Erbil, noted that had the U.S. conducted this operation in the same manner Bush did, "we are going to get the same results as what we got before. And 10 years later, 15 years later, we'll be back here again, doing the exact same thing over and over again." In terms of cost and losses, the Colonel added, "it would cost a lot more. A lot more lives. A lot more resources ... and in the end would the result be any different?"<sup>421</sup>

---

<sup>416</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>418</sup> Blanchard and Humud, *The Islamic State*

<sup>419</sup> Ibid, 15-16

<sup>420</sup> Keven Baron and Defense One, "How the U.S. Military Sees the Anti-ISIS Fight," *The Atlantic*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/obama-doctrine-military-trump/513470/>

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

### **3-4 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV): A Less Costly Alternative**

While the Obama administration continued Bush's extensive "War on Terror," it adopted a more discreet and less costly instruments to wage it. The use of technological surrogates, especially Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) known as drones, was the linchpin of Obama's strategy to kill el Qaeda leaders and militants in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and the Sahel region. This strategy was not only less costly in blood and treasure compared to ground invasions like in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also a way to adapt to the changes and challenges in modern warfare. Because retrenchment is about reducing the costs of conducting foreign policy, UAV became the instruments of choice to do so, especially after a decade of conventional wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that drained enormous resources without achieving policy objectives.

The reliance on new and cost-effective strategies is nothing new in US military history, but occurs in a larger framework through which the Pentagon continuously seeks to gain a competitive edge over its adversaries and find new ways that meet new challenges. After the Second World War when direct military confrontation proved so costly in casualties, the US introduced the nuclear deterrence to make sure that the harm to any offense from an adversary outweighed any potential gains. In the 1970s and after a costly proxy war in Vietnam, the Pentagon invested heavily in information technology which ultimately helped achieve a level of "an unchallenged military superiority"<sup>422</sup> After two costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a constrained military budget, and with the diffusion of new military technology even among non-state actors, the US turned to drones as a means to reduce cost and maximize advantage.

In an address to the National Defense University, when the Pentagon's air campaign against ISIS was underway, Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work had this to say about the evolving U.S. military strategy that sought:

*"a renewed spirit of innovation and adaptability across our military and fundamentally new ways of doing business. We need creative ideas on how to posture our forces globally to accomplish the greatest strategic effect, how to fight more effectively in new domains with possibly game changing technologies, how to protect U.S. interests and enhance our security in new*

---

<sup>422</sup> Press Operations "Deputy Secretary of Defense Speech," U.S. Department of Defense, August 5 2014, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/605598/>

*areas. And we must do all this with fewer resources and what will no doubt be a smaller military”*<sup>423</sup>

As he calculated that the crisis in Syria was beyond his government to solve, Obama concluded that the primary threat to US interests in Syria and beyond remained “terrorism”. Though he stressed the need to work with U.S. partners and rely on local forces to share in the burden of dealing with problems in the Middle East, Obama did not rule out unilateral actions to protect American interests. Such action, when backed by “actionable intelligence”, would follow two precedent examples: “capture operations like the one that brought a terrorist involved in the plot to bomb our embassies in 1998 to face justice; or drone strikes like those we carried out in Yemen and Somalia.”<sup>424</sup> While Obama rarely resorted to the former, he made the latter an enduring facet of his foreign policy legacy.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that the number of strikes, mostly by drones, in the US “covert war on terror” during Obama’s time in office was ten times higher than that of his predecessor. By the time he left office in early 2017, Obama ordered 563 airstrikes compared to 57 by the previous administration. In his first year in the Oval Office only, Obama supervised more airstrikes than the entire presidency of George Bush. This staggering increase in drone strikes occurred when the White House was “extricating the US military from intractable, costly ground wars in the Middle East and Asia.”<sup>425</sup>

During the phase of troop withdrawal from Iraq, the pentagon claimed that the use of drones was confined to surveillance and reconnaissance missions and acknowledged that it was operating 57 flight routes as of November 2011. Between 2009 and late 2011, an equivalent of 788,000 combat hours were operated by UAV with an average of between 8,000 and 11,000 sorties per year. Commenting on the widespread use of this technology by the US army, the chief spokesman of the US forces in Iraq noted that “What started out as a system that was only available in few numbers and controlled at the highest levels, has now made it down. Every one of our brigades has its own RPA [remotely piloted aircraft].”<sup>426</sup>

---

<sup>423</sup> Ibid

<sup>424</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy,” *the White House*, May 28, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>

<sup>425</sup>“Obama’s Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush,” *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush>

<sup>426</sup>“Analysis: After Eight Years in Iraq’s Skies, Where Now for US Drones,” *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, January, December 14, 2011, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/opinion/2011-12-14/analysis-after-eight-years-in-iraqs-skies-where-now-for-us-drones>

The increase in the production of UAV and the budget allocated to their research and development is revealing of the government's changing military strategy. The Pentagon spent \$550 million on drones in 2002, but the figure rose to \$5 billion in 2011. In 2005 drones represented only 5% of the total number of aircrafts in the US air force inventory and jumped to 33% as of 2012. Consequently, more pilots have been trained to operate drones than conventional aircrafts. As of 2012, 10% of the military budget allocated to the military aircrafts was appropriated to UAVs.<sup>427</sup>

From a military perspective, Pentagon officials advance a number of arguments for this growing interest in UAVs. In a time of repeated cuts in the military budget, drones represent a cost-efficient alternative. The budget required for the production of an F22 fighter can produce 14 drones.<sup>428</sup> The new U.S. Navy program to develop Unmanned Carrier-Launched Airborne Surveillance and Strike (UCLASS) is an example of less costly aircrafts. Compared to manned aircrafts, training for the use of UCLASS require 70% less training hours and result in a reduction of 40% to 50% of operation costs. Further training in landing on an aircraft carrier, especially in harsh and exception conditions, is no longer needed as landing UCLASS is fully automated. Therefore, less flying hours for training, less crashes and accidents, and less aircrafts dedicated to training help in saving billions of dollars.<sup>429</sup>

After more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan the resort to another conventional war became very unlikely, unless performed remotely. The human and financial costs of these war generated a public opposition never seen since the Vietnam war. Therefore, using UAV removes the risk to U.S. military personnel with the possibility of doing harder and more challenging tasks. While pilots would endure flying planes for limited number of hours, drones can perform surveillance missions for longer periods extending to days.<sup>430</sup> Beyond the physical limitations of army personnel, drones are not constrained by the emotional and psychological traumas associated with warfare, which has continued to be one of the most post-war disorders that affect U.S. veterans.

The use of drones thus fits in well with Obama's "light footprint strategy" which seeks to avoid the deployment of large number of forces on the ground in conflicts overseas. As a

---

<sup>427</sup> Ahmed S. Hashim and Gregoire Patte, " 'What is the Buzz?' The Rise of Drone Warfare," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 4, no. 9 (September 2012), 9.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> Paul Scharre and Daniel Burg, "To Save Money go Unmanned," *War on the Rocks*, October 22, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/10/to-save-money-go-unmanned/>

<sup>430</sup> Jeremiah Gertler, "U.S. Unmanned Aerial Systems," *CRS*, January 3, 2012, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42136.pdf>

senior intelligence officer contended, drones are deployed in a different epoch when “we have a keener awareness than ever of what it costs, in blood and treasure, to go into a country on the ground, and how difficult it is to extract yourself while you are there.” But the downside of the strategy, he added, is that it’s not as effective in the long term as the decisive use of force and as they carry the danger to “fall in love with a whiz-bang new technology, because it’s easy to justify relying on it more and more. And that’s when a tactical weapon can begin defining your strategy”<sup>431</sup>

Unlike the two previous wars which generated anger and outrage among the American public, opposition to the use of drones never amounted to the level that compel politicians to rethink their extensive use. A Pew Research poll in March 2013 found that the majority of Americans (61%) support the use of drones to “target extremists in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia” compared to 30 % who opposed. The practice also receives a bipartisan support across the political spectrum with 69% of Republicans, 59% of Democrats and 60% of independents expressing approval. This stands in stark contrast to the world opinion with the majority (more than 50%) in 31 countries among the 39 countries surveyed disapproved with the practice. More than 80% of the surveyed population in 11 countries, mostly in the Middle East and Latin America, also opposed the use of drones.<sup>432</sup> This lack of public opposition is a consequence not only of the covert nature of the program, but the absence of the dire human and financial ramifications associated with conventional wars which usually affect the wider public.

Though Obama’s promise to close the detention facility in Guantanamo was never materialized, targeted killing relieved the Obama administration from detaining and interrogating suspects, and from the political and legal controversy that usually come up with the practice. Likewise, to encroach on a sovereign country with remotely piloted aircraft would be far less unpopular than waging conventional wars.<sup>433</sup> This is what an administration official described as a “wise policy.” “Let’s faced,” he explained, “These days, it’s our only way into Pakistan. We can’t put especial forces on the ground-it was hard before the Bin Laden raid, and it’s just about impossible now.”<sup>434</sup>

---

<sup>431</sup>David E. Sanger, p244.

<sup>432</sup>Bruce Brake, “Report questions drone use, widely unpopular globally, but not in the U.S.” *Pew Research Center*, October 23, 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/23/report-questions-drone-use-widely-unpopular-globally-but-not-in-the-u-s/>

<sup>433</sup> Daniel Byman “Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington Weapons of Choice,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July/August 2013): 34.

<sup>434</sup> Quoted Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 254-255.

But Obama's drone war has been as controversial as many of his predecessor's policies whether at the legal or the ethical level. The legal adviser of the Obama administration Harold Koh saw no legal constraints or breach of international law in Obama's use of UAV. While he acknowledged the limits on what he could say publicly, Koh considered that the use of UAV and other lethal targeting strategies are in line with international law. Koh also testified that the Obama administration was "committed by word and deed" to behave in line with the applicable law.<sup>435</sup> When out of office after four years in service, Koh maintained the same stance except the reservations he expressed on the lack of transparency in the drone program. To those who criticize Koh on his approval of the use of drones despite his track as a human rights activist, Koh replied that the answer is "sad and simple" and that "as regrettable as killing always is, killing those with whom you are at war maybe lawful so long as you strictly follow the laws of war"<sup>436</sup>

Critics, however, have doubted even if the "war on terror" can rightly be classified as a "war" according to international law. Before killing can be legal, a level of "armed conflict" should be maintained according to the Geneva Convention. In Pakistan or Yemen, two close allies to the U.S., let alone being in conflict, the term "war" can hardly be applied. Moreover, most of the covert actions by drones are performed by the CIA, which is not part of the U.S. army; the institution assigned the task of conducting wars. The premise of Koh's sharp criticism of the Bush administration's counterterrorism practices do apply on targeted killing which, according to John Yoo, represents "a far greater deprivation of civil liberties than detention, interrogation and trial by military."<sup>437</sup>

From a moral standpoint, the distance that drones allow between their operator and his target might well result in lesser fear of killing and thus trigger more atrocities. From the distance, army personnel would dare to perform tasks that they would never imagine doing in the real world. As an army chaplain puts it, "as war becomes safer and easier, as soldiers are removed from the horrors of war and see the enemy not as humans but blips on the screen, there is a very real danger of losing the deterrent that such horrors provide." This physical distance

---

<sup>435</sup>Harold Hongju Koh, "The Obama administration and International Law," *US Department of State*, March 25, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>

<sup>436</sup>Harold Hongju Koh, "How to End the Forever War," *Oxford Union*, May 7, 2013, <https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/Faculty/KohOxfordSpeech.pdf>

<sup>437</sup> Hillel Ofek, "The Tortured Logic of Obama's Drone War," *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2010, <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-tortured-logic-of-obamas-drone-war>

results even in a psychological distance when the soldier “doesn’t share with his foes even those brief minutes of danger that would give them a bond of mutual risk.”<sup>438</sup>

The heated controversy surrounding the killed civilians in drone strikes did hardly contemplate who would fit as such in the U.S. military categorization. Obama was very right when he vindicated that the civilian casualties in these strikes were very rare, because drone operators consider any Military Aged Male (MAM) a legitimate target.<sup>439</sup> But even this distinction is blurred in the conversations preceding the decision to strike these targets. On 21 February 2010 in Afghanistan, a drone operation killed at least 15 civilians among them children. These children were targeted not by mistake, but because they were “adolescent,” not children, and therefore “fits in the established category of the U.S. military.”<sup>440</sup>

Beyond the legal and moral grounding of the use of drones, critics and even U.S. officials argue that these weapons carry strategic and long-term risks. In essence, Obama drone wars emulate the same practices and ramifications that the president often criticized of the previous administration. While preemption was the guiding principle of the Bush invasion of Iraq, Obama made the case for “narrow, preemptive strikes against terrorists who had stuck before or who, intelligence showed, were suspect of planning attacks.”<sup>441</sup> The argument Obama and likeminded officials made against detention and interrogation that they were used as propaganda and recruiting tool against the United States has also been generated by the use of drones. Similarly, Obama’s battle to win the hearts and minds of people on the periphery could be hardly advanced by a controversial practice like the use of drones.<sup>442</sup>

The Obama administration, moreover, worked even “to institutionalize and normalize the practice.” Unlike his predecessor, Obama acknowledged the once covert program and laid down the lexicon and legal justification for its practice. For instance, what the administration dubbed “signature strikes” can target any individual that shows signs of association with militant groups through his attitudes and behavior, even if his name is not on the “target list”. Among the ten Americans killed with drones under the Obama administration, only one was officially targeted. As the public gets more comfortable with, and even supportive to, the use of drones, and since they have been employed by both Republican and Democratic

---

<sup>438</sup> Peter W. Singer, “Military Robots and the Laws of War,” *The New Atlantis*, Winter 2009, <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/military-robots-and-the-laws-of-war>

<sup>439</sup> Jamie Allinson, “The Necropolitics of Drones,” *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 2 (June 2015):113–127, p120

<sup>440</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>441</sup> Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 252.

<sup>442</sup> Ofek, *Tortured Logic*, 39.



governments, the practice becomes a bipartisan issue that is far from being investigated or questioned.<sup>443</sup>

Officials in the Obama administration even worry about the “overdependence” on the use of drones and critics argue that, given the lack of constraints of all kinds associated with conventional wars, the program might become “a default strategy” to conduct military conflicts with the risk of trapping the nation in a state of “permanent war”<sup>444</sup> As they become “too frequent” and “too unilateral,” argues David Rohde, drones are increasingly construed as a “potent, unnerving symbol of unchecked American power.”<sup>445</sup> While Obama came to office with the primary task of ending two costly wars he inherited, he left to his successor an entrenched practice he will find hard to not emulate.

From his policy in Syria, to his campaign against ISIS and his overall counterterrorism strategy, President Obama’s overarching objective was to avoid a ground and a costly conflict similar to the war in Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan. But when he decided to get military involved, the reference was what retrenching states have historically exercised and that is, a discrete and less costly ways to conducting wars like the reliance on local allies, indigenous forces, and airstrikes by manned and unmanned aircrafts. What made these options more attractive is not only that they are cost-effective, but also because they are less controversial for a president who came with the promise to end wars not to inaugurate them.

#### **4- Accommodating Tehran**

At times of economic and military setbacks, retrenching states not only scale back existing commitments, avoid engaging in new ones, and rely on less costly alternatives to conduct military operations, but they also seek rapprochement, and at times appeasement, with adversaries to avoid the heavy costs of confrontation. Under strained conditions of scarce resources and reduced capabilities, such states tend to offer concessions to adversaries and resort to diplomacy to deal with existing differences to minimize risks to their national interests and to allay the fears and concerns of these adversaries.<sup>446</sup> An example of such approach is what the Nixon, Ford and the Carter administrations adopted at a time of fiscal austerity and after a costly war in Vietnam. The opening to China helped reduce the threats to

---

<sup>443</sup>Micah Zenko, “Obama’s Embrace of Drone Strikes Will be a Lasting Legacy,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/12/reflecting-on-obamas-presidency/obamas-embrace-of-drone-strikes-will-be-a-lasting-legacy>

<sup>444</sup> Hashim and Patte, *What is the Buzz?*, p14

<sup>445</sup> Rohde, *The Obama Doctrine*, 66.

<sup>446</sup> MacDonald and Parent, *Graceful Decline*,12



American interests in Asia, the intensive negotiations with Egypt brought the country to the Western orbit and the diplomatic efforts with Panama helped resolve the dispute over the Canal.<sup>447</sup>

At a time when the U.S. had little appetite for military confrontation, dealing with “rogue states” in the Middle East would depart from either the costly containment pursued by the Clinton administration or the objective of regime change sought by the Bush administration. In this regard, Iran figured prominently in a wider approach to *engage* even with adversaries to lessen animosity and seek rapprochement. In most of Obama’s dealings with Tehran, preventing it from acquiring a nuclear weapon through sanctions and diplomacy remained the primary policy objective.

To this end, the Obama administration remained cautious not to escalate tensions with the Iranian leadership despite the latter’s perceived destabilizing role in the region. In the public protests that took to the streets in 2009, Obama’s public statements did not go beyond expressing his “concern” and that of the American people. In Iraq, moreover, the goal of troop withdrawal trumped any counterbalancing act of Iran’s growing influence on Iraqi politics and security. In Syria too, while Iran became heavily invested in propping up a staunch regional ally, the U.S. remained on the sidelines, avoided confronting Tehran on the stage, and kept the nuclear talks detached from Iran’s activities in the country. In the campaign against ISIS, the Pentagon and Iranian-backed militias became partners in almost every aspect but name. On the nuclear track, military options and containment were substituted by multilateral sanctions and diplomacy.

In his “new beginning” speech in Cairo, Obama did not miss out recapitulating on what he repeatedly emphasized in his campaign, to extend a hand to U.S. adversaries including Iran. In this address Obama made two symbolic concessions; he admitted his country’s role in the overthrow of the democratically elected Iranian government and recognized the argument that if another power possesses nuclear weapons, referring to Israel, others should have the same right. To the former, Obama solicited the Iranian leaders to not “remain trapped in the past” and expressed his readiness to move forward; to the latter he set an ambitious, but rather tactical, promise to seek a world without nuclear arms. While Obama made all other

---

<sup>447</sup>Huntington, *Lippmann Gap*

issues of contention open to compromise, he noted that “when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point.”<sup>448</sup>

#### **4-1 An Opening for Engagement**

Putting his Iran policy in the larger perspective of the Obama doctrine, the president asserted that his doctrine is to “engage, but we preserve all our capabilities,” an engagement he explained would serve American interests far better than a policy of sanctions and isolation. In his interview with Thomas Friedman, Obama expressed admiration for the Iranian people and contempt with his Arab allies. In this context, a confrontational course seems less of an option with people with “incredible talents and ingenuity and entrepreneurship” and who have “shown themselves willing, I think, to endure hardship when they considered a point of national pride or, in some cases, national survival.” And for the Arabs who wanted to see the U.S. dragged in a war in Syria Obama questioned “why is it that we can’t have Arabs fighting [against] the terrible human rights abuses that have been perpetrated, or fighting against what Assad have done.”<sup>449</sup>

This approach of engagement was embraced against a background of past confrontational policies that made Iran more defiant and even stronger. With the Bush invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran was spared an enemy in the east and a rival in the west and was further emboldened to develop its nuclear program. Advocates of a military option in the Bush administration articulated empty threats as the means at hand never matched their objectives. In the first months of Obama in office, argues David Miller, “Iran is sucking up the oxygen, it’s everywhere in town, to the point that even Arab-Israeli issues seem somehow derivative.”<sup>450</sup>

The protests that followed the contested presidential elections in Iran in 2009 were the first test for Obama’s efforts of engagement with Tehran. The furthest Obama could go to condemn the Iranian official response to the protests was to announce that it “is of concern to me and it’s of concern to the American people.” This stance was adopted despite Obama’s conviction that the elections were rigged, but the preference was to court Iran to the

---

<sup>448</sup> “President Obama Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning,” *U.S. Department of State*, June 4, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2009/124342.htm>

<sup>449</sup> Thomas Friedman, “Iran and the Obama Doctrine,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html>

<sup>450</sup> Roger Cohen, “The Making of an Iran Policy,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 30, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/magazine/02Iran-t.html>

negotiating table rather than promoting democracy or defending human rights.<sup>451</sup> Even before the elections, officials in Washington preferred to deal with Tehran as an equal and a sovereign power with legitimate concerns, and to avoid the patronizing language that characterized Washington's discourse for decades. "Who they select as leader in Iran is their prerogative, and there is nothing we can do to control that" argues Ray Takeyh, the advisor to Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, and this course can be pursued by dealing with Iran "as an entity, a state, rather than privileging one faction or another." The objective of such policy, according to Takeyh, was to add "a degree of rationality" in the relationship between the two countries and make it more like one "between two nations with some differences and some common interests" and "to get beyond the incendiary rhetoric."<sup>452</sup>

Even in their meetings behind closed doors, senior officials in Washington garbled with the challenge of reconciling the call to condemn Iran's crackdown on protesters and its human rights record with Obama's preferred course of engagement to come to a deal on its nuclear program. "It is difficult to weigh all the different considerations" noted a senior administration official, "but given the profoundly serious consequences of an Iranian regime that acquires a nuclear weapons capability, the judgment in the end was that it was important to follow through on the offer of direct engagement."<sup>453</sup>

American accommodation of Iran was manifest not only in internal politics, but more evidently in Iran's growing regional influence and its activities to project it. Nowhere was this influence nurtured unhinged like in Iraq, where the U.S. invested billions of dollars for occupation, five years of fighting and more than a decade of strategic planning and diplomatic work. Iranian influence was translated in the growing religious ties with Shia leaders in Iraq, the leverage on Iraqi politics and Iran's role in training and arming Shia militias.

These militias were instrumental in securing a corridor across the country to transport fighters and arms to neighboring Syria and Lebanon. In other instances, these militias engage in recruiting new fighters, freely crossing the borders into Iran where they receive training and then are flown to Syria to fight on the side of the Assad regime.<sup>454</sup> These flights went "unmolested" through the Iranian space, despite el Maliki's government assertion of

---

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Arango, *US Planning*

conducting regular inspections; a measure which even American officials acknowledge was rare. According to some analysts, this trespass on Iraq sovereignty is but an example of the influence Iran exerts on el Maliki government.<sup>455</sup>

The coming of el Maliki to power is in itself a strong manifestation of Iranian influence. During the rule of Saddam in Iraq, Maliki was not only exiled in Iran but was also commending brigades of Iraqi militants in Ahwaz to fight against Saddam in the Iran-Iraq war. But what concerned American officials most are not Maliki's strong ties with Tehran, but his clear record from "terrorist" activities. When he came to office, Maliki worked ardently to tighten his grip on power by marginalizing Sunni rivals. After he ordered the arrest of vice president Hashimi, Maliki removed the director of the central bank Sinan al Shabib from office, banished the head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service Mohamed Shawani, and procured a high court decision that gave him the uncontested power to draft legislations.<sup>456</sup>

The 2010 parliamentary elections that brought el Maliki to power are evident of the disparity, and the discrepancy, in the influence that the U.S. and Iran could exert on Iraqi politics. The results of the elections did not give Maliki's State of the Law alliance the needed majority to form a government, and the same was true to the secular coalition of el Iraqiya. Based even on accounts of American officials, it was Qassim Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Quds Force, who brokered a deal between the Shia political factions to form the government. In exchange for Sadr's support, el Maliki agreed to the appointment of Jallal Talbani as president, to marginalize the role of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service, which was known for its cooperation with the CIA, and to reject any plans for American residual troops in the country.<sup>457</sup>

Iyad Allawi, the head of the Iraqiya later noted that it was Americans who helped consolidate Iranian influence in the country. "I needed American support" he explained, "but they wanted to leave, and they handed the country to the Iranians. Iraq is a failed state now, an Iranian colony." Although the White House was aware of the minutes of the meeting between Soleimani and Iraqi Shia factions, it did not take any actions to alter the course of the final

---

<sup>455</sup> Dexter Filkins, "What we Left Behind," *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind>

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

outcome. A former American diplomat in Iraq concluded that his country “lost four thousand five hundred Americans only to let the Iranians dictate the outcome of the war.”<sup>458</sup>

While the Obama administration was very clear about its policy to prevent Iran from going nuclear, its actions towards Iran’s support of Bashar el Assad in Syria and other non-state actors did not go beyond verbal condemnations. In a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman described Iran’s “alliance of surrogates, proxies, and partners” like Hezbollah and Hamas as a “Threat Network” which continued to receive Iranian support and training, but he articulated no measures to confront this alliance. Likewise, Sherman calculated that Iran would “stop at no cost ... to prop up the Assad regime,” but described an American reaction that did not go beyond highlighting “the role of Iran in the Syrian regime’s violation of human rights” in “several executive orders” or stepping up consultations with its allies in the region.<sup>459</sup>

Meanwhile, Obama’s resistance to intervention in Syria is believed to be driven in part by his calculation to prioritize reaching a deal with Iran on its nuclear program. In *The Final Year*, a documentary on Obama’s diplomacy in his last year in office, Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national security adviser, testified that “if the U.S. had intervened more forcefully in Syria, it would have dominated Obama’s second term and [the deal] would have been impossible to achieve.” The position of Iran as an ally to Assad also affected Obama’s calculus that aimed to deal with the nuclear talks independently of Iran’s activities in Syria. “Now former Obama officials have admitted what analysts have been arguing for several years,” argues Lee Smith, “Obama cared only about getting a nuclear deal with Iran, no matter how that might affect other important U.S. policies.”<sup>460</sup>

Apart from this separation in the two strands of Iran policy, reaching a nuclear agreement and dealing with Iran’s regional ambitions, the Obama administration called for, and welcomed, a tacit coordination with the Iranians in the fight against ISIS. In a letter to the Iranian supreme leader Khomeini, Obama outlined a shared interest between the two countries in fighting and defeating ISIS. The letter aimed not only at shoring up the international coalition to fight the group, but also at “nudging Iran’s religious leader closer to a nuclear deal.” On the sidelines

---

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Wendy Sherman, “U.S. Policy towards Iran,” *U.S. Department of State*, May 15, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/us/rm/2013/202684.htm>

<sup>460</sup> Enes Calli and Ricky Zipp, “Did the Iran Nuclear Deal Prevent Obama from Entering the Syrian Conflict,” *MEDILL News Service*, March 21, 2018, <http://dc.medill.northwestern.edu/blog/2018/03/21/did-the-iran-nuclear-deal-prevent-obama-from-entering-the-syrian-conflict/#sthash.dYjWyCjI.5rmBfAA7.dpbs>

of the nuclear talks and through the Iraqi government, the U.S. also sent signals about the campaign's objectives to allay Iran's doubts. A senior American official commented that "We've passed on messages to the Iranians through the Iraqi government and Sistani saying our objective is against ISIL" and that "we are not using this as a platform to reoccupy Iraq or to undermine Iran."<sup>461</sup>

Though officials in the two countries denied direct coordination in the campaign, the lack of criticism from each side against the other's military operation is a tacit agreement and a sign of growing accommodation. Compared to his previous fierce condemnation of the U.S. policy in Iraq, Khamenei did not condemn the coalition campaign. A senior adviser to the Iranian president noted that though his country would not welcome American troops on the ground, the airstrikes would aid "paralyzed" Iraqi forces. In a coalition operation in Amerli, a former official underlined the cooperation between the aid the Iranian Revolutionary Guard supplied to the Peshmerga forces and the air cover provided by the United States.<sup>462</sup>

In Iraq, Iran not only helped train and equip Shia militias, but also expanded its campaign to airstrikes. *The New York Times* reported that "often a single Iraqi officer will serve as an intermediary between the American-led campaign and the Iranians," and concluded that "a degree of coordination between the American military and Iran's is imperative but also awkward." Secretary of State John Kerry commented that "it's self-evident that if Iran is taking on ISIL in some particular place and it's confined to taking on ISIL and it has an impact, it's going to be — the net effect is positive."<sup>463</sup>

## **4-2 A Multilateral Diplomatic Route to a Nuclear Deal**

To achieve its overarching objective of reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, the Obama administration resorted to a policy of multilateral sanctions and diplomacy, while it relegated a military option or containment to a secondary position. Meanwhile, Obama resisted a legislative hell-bent on confronting Iran and imposing new sanctions, and regional allies pressing for a more aggressive policy to curb Tehran's regional ambitions.

---

<sup>461</sup> Jay Solomon and Carol E. Lee, "Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran's Khamenei About Fighting Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>

<sup>462</sup> Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 1 (2015): 11.

<sup>463</sup> Tim Arango and Thomas Erdbrink, "U.S. and Iran both Attack ISIS, but They not to Look Like Allies," *New York Times*, December 3, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/world/middleeast/iran-airstrikes-hit-islamic-state-in-iraq.html>

For President Obama, the wisdom of a diplomatic course is not hard to gauge given the dire ramifications of a military option or a do-nothing alternative. If the U.S. solves the nuclear issue diplomatically while preserving military deterrence, argues the president, “we are more likely to be safe, more likely to be secure, and in a better position to protect our allies, and who knows? Iran may change.” On the other hand, even if a military strike would freeze the development of the program for a while, it would give Iran a stronger incentive to rush for producing a bomb and would give the hard-liners in the country a stronger rationale for a nuclear deterrence to prevent American aggression. Doing nothing along with maintaining sanctions would likewise give Iran the leeway to develop the program while it deprives the U.S. of valuable insights on what is going on the ground.<sup>464</sup>

Critics of a military option also contend that as the Iranian regime uses the nuclear program as a political instrument to tighten its grip on power, any attack would be seen as a threat to the very existence of the Islamic Revolution and would therefore trigger an all-out military conflict. Even if Iran’s reaction would be limited, like the closure of the strait of Hormuz, the ramifications to the economies of U.S. regional allies and to the global economy would be enormous. With the nuclear knowledge and infrastructure very likely to be in place after a military attack, the U.S. would still have to invest in a post-war containment strategy to prevent Iran from reconstructing the program. Thus, as long as other options are not fully exhausted, the choice of a military strike should be put on the back burner.<sup>465</sup>

After the U.S. rejected an agreement brokered by Turkey and Brazil with Iran on 17 May 2010, the G5+1 group announced a new set of sanctions through UNSC Resolution 1929 passed on June 9th, 2010. After several rounds of negotiations, the parties reached an interim agreement on November 24, 2013, known as the Joint Plan of Action (JPA), by which Iran agreed to freeze the enrichment of uranium to a 20% level in return for a partial lifting of sanctions.<sup>466</sup> Critics argue that the sanctions, which reduced Iran’s oil exports to 1 million barrel a day, deprived Iran from access to the global financial system and resulted in a 50% loss in the value of its currency, were responsible not only for bringing Iran to the negotiating

---

<sup>464</sup> Friedman, *Iran and the Obama Doctrine*

<sup>465</sup> Colin H. Kahl, “Not Time to Attack Iran: Why War Should Be a Last Resort,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March/April 2012), pp. 166-173

<sup>466</sup> Kenneth Katzman, “Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses,” *Congressional Research Service*, October 1, 2014, 26-27, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4d6f4eb42.pdf>

table, but also pressured the Iranian people to elect a more moderate president in the 2013 elections.<sup>467</sup>

After his election, President Rouhani and his American counterparts exchanged correspondence and adopted a discourse that signaled a new era of reconciliation. In an opinion article in *The Washington Post*, the Iranian president expressed his commitment to keep the promise he made to his people, “to engage in a constructive interaction with the world.” Explaining his approach, Rouhani asserted that a “constructive” diplomacy “doesn’t mean relinquishing one’s rights. It means engaging with one’s counterparts on a principle of equals and with mutual respect.”<sup>468</sup> Obama on his part noted that, though his administration was determined to prevent a nuclear armed Iran, he preferred to do so peacefully. Meanwhile, he asserted that the U.S. had no intention for regime change and welcomed an Iran with a nuclear capability for peaceful purposes.<sup>469</sup>

In addition to sanctions, Obama also resorted to cyber warfare to slow down the progress of the Iranian nuclear program. His national security team accelerated and expanded a cyber-attack program on the Iranian nuclear facilities, codenamed Olympic Games, which was already underway in the last years of the Bush administration. In meetings with his aides in the situation room Obama showed strong dedication to the program and expressed concerns that if unsuccessful, sanctions and diplomacy would take time to bear fruits and Israel would rush to a military strike that could trigger a regional conflict. Getting the Israelis on board of the program, argued several White House officials in interviews with *The New York Times*, was also a way to convince them of a workable alternative to military strikes. This line of reasoning reveals the president’s tendency to explore every option other than military strikes. “From his first days in office” noted a senior official “he [Obama] was deep into every step in slowing the Iranian program – the diplomacy, the sanctions, every major decision....and it’s safe to say that whatever other activity have been under way was no exception to that rule.”<sup>470</sup>

---

<sup>467</sup>Kenneth Katzman, “Iran Sanctions,” *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East*5, no. 1, (2014): 41.

<sup>468</sup> Hassan Rouhani, “President of Iran Hassan Rouhani: Time to Engage,” *Washington Post*, September 19, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d49b41edff83](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47e_story.html?utm_term=.d49b41edff83)

<sup>469</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City,” *The American Presidency Project*, September 24, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-11>

<sup>470</sup> David E. Sanger, “Obama Order Sped up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/middleeast/obama-ordered-wave-of-cyberattacks-against-iran.html>



After the interim deal was reached and during the negotiations leading to the final agreement, Obama made sure to use all his presidential prerogatives and to oppose further sanctions on Iran by Congress. One of the JPA's provisions states that "the U.S. administration, acting consistent with the respective roles of the President and the Congress, will refrain from imposing new nuclear-related sanctions."<sup>471</sup> In a news conference with the British Prime Minister, Obama vowed to veto a new bill of new sanctions under consideration in Congress. This threat came despite the fact that the bill was set to impose new sanctions only if no final agreement was reached and despite what the president described as a 50/50 prospect for a final nuclear deal. The president argued that any new sanctions would marshal the world's sympathy with Iran, threaten the end of the existing sanctions, and make targeting the Iranian nuclear facilities a challenging endeavor. In a move reminiscent of his stance on the intervention in Syria, the president threatened Congress of sharing the ownership of any decision of military intervention against Iran and promised to take the case to the American people.<sup>472</sup>

In a Senate Committee of Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs hearing, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken made the case that by imposing more sanctions and "by acting precipitously," "there is nothing to be gained-and everything to be lost." The downsides of such move are manifold, not least of them Iran's withdrawal from the talks and the resumption of the development of its nuclear program. Even if Iran would continue the negotiations, it would adopt a harder stance and other participants would be less inclined to enforce the existing sanctions or impose new ones in the event of stalemated talks. Thus, "the United States, not Iran, would be isolated, the sanctions regime would collapse and Iran could turn on everything it turned off under the JPOA without fear of effective, international sanctions pressure in response."<sup>473</sup>

The House Committee on Foreign Affairs criticized what it saw a new lease on life given to Iran's destabilizing efforts in the region by the partial elimination of sanctions. The committee's chairman Edward Royce argued that even with the burden of sanctions Iran was able to fund its regional proxies and with a final agreement, "any sanctions relief will bolster

---

<sup>471</sup> "Joint Plan of Actions," *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 24 November 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/jpoa.pdf>

<sup>472</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in Joint Press Conference," *The White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/16/...president-obama-and-prime-minister-cameron-united-kingdom-joint->

<sup>473</sup> Antony J. Blin, "Perspectives on the Strategic Necessity of Iran Sanctions," *U.S. Department of State*, January 27, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/d/2015/236784.htm>

Iran.” Eliot Engel of New York accused the President of acting unilaterally to give concessions to Tehran, while he ignored “our calls for congressional oversight and our warnings on dealing with Iran while ignoring its destabilizing efforts.” Brad Sherman of Californian noted that the U.S. had no leverage in the negotiations as long as the Iranian economy was not “completely on the ropes” and that the existing sanctions brought the Iranians to the table but did not bring them “on their knees.”<sup>474</sup>

After the final deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was reached on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Obama welcomed a congressional review of its details and “a robust debate” among the representatives of the American people, but asserted that he would “veto any legislation that prevents the successful implementation of this deal.” His argument was that the U.S. does not “have to accept an inevitable spiral into conflict” and “certainly shouldn’t seek it.” Two months later, the president was spared a resort to his veto power as the democrats defeated a bill promoted by republicans to reject the nuclear agreement. Although the bill was symbolic, as the president would approve the agreement through an executive order, the House speaker John A. Boehner asserted that “this debate is far from over and, frankly, it’s just beginning” while he threatened that “we will use every tool at our disposal to stop, slow and delay this agreement from being fully implemented.”<sup>475</sup>

The Obama administration concluded the deal despite the intense lobbying and opposition from its allies in the region, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia. Wendy Sherman, head of the U.S. team in the negotiations, recalled that as the prospect of finalizing a deal loomed larger, the Israelis “began to act in concert with the GOP to foil our progress.” In a step that outraged the White House, Netanyahu was invited by the House speaker to address a joint session of Congress in which he castigated the deal and decried Obama’s Iran policy. In the same “backdoor” manner, the republicans sent a letter to the Iranian supreme leader warning that any deal without congressional approval would be valid only as long as President Obama is in office.<sup>476</sup> The failure to thwart a deal at the level of Congress was a manifestation “of the diminishing power of the Israeli lobbying force that spent tens of millions of dollars to prevent the accord.”<sup>477</sup>

---

<sup>474</sup> Ibid

<sup>475</sup> Jennifer Steinhauer, “Democrats Hand Victory to Obama on Iran Nuclear Deal,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/us/politics/iran-nuclear-deal-senate.html>

<sup>476</sup> Wendy Sherman, “How We Got the Iran Deal,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-08-13/how-we-got-iran-deal>

<sup>477</sup>Steinhauer, *Democrats Hand Victory*

Driven by the same rationale that lifting sanctions would empower Iran to project its influence in the region, the Saudis lobbied vehemently to hinder the conclusion of the deal and later to make sure its concerns received a hearing during the negotiations. According to the Foreign Agents Registration Act, Saudi Arabia funded an \$11 million lobbying campaign, most of which aimed at weakening a possible rapprochement between Tehran and Washington.<sup>478</sup> To get their support for a final deal, President Obama made sure that the concerns of his Gulf allies are met through a mechanism of an instant resumption of sanctions if Iran did not respect the terms of the accord. In a meeting with these allies in Camp David two months before the final deal was reached, Obama reassured them of their security and promised further arms sales.<sup>479</sup>

Informed by a long history of futile military operations to deal with adversaries and leery of a regional conflict that would steer the country in an increasingly volatile region, President Obama set to explore every possible alternative to deal with an ambitious Tehran. With a set of multilateral sanctions, diplomacy and a continuous grapple with a Congress lobbied by regional allies, Obama was finally able to prove his case that dealing with intricate problems does not have to be always through military force.

---

<sup>478</sup> Taylor Luck, "To Counter Iranian Rival, Saudi Arabia Steps up Washington Lobbying," *The Christian Monitor*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/0208/To-counter-Iranian-rival-Saudi-Arabia-steps-up-Washington-lobbying>

<sup>479</sup> William D. Hartung and Ben Freeman, "The Saudi Lobby's Scheme to Destroy the Iran Deal," *The American Conservative*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-saudi-lobbys-scheme-to-destroy-the-iran-deal/>

## 5- Conclusion

British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously noted that “events” are the catalyst of change in a government’s policy and choices. President Obama might have never imagined the dramatic changes that swept the region during his time in office, but the way he stuck to an overarching approach of retrenchment he espoused at the beginning of his presidency is revealing of the coherence and consistency in his Middle East policy.

With the overall aim of bridging the gap between U.S. Middle East policy objectives and the available resources to achieve them, the Obama administration followed the same track pursued by previous great powers or American administrations working under similar conditions. This included scaling back military and diplomatic commitments, the resistance to engage in new ones, the reliance on regional allies to meet security objectives and the resort to multilateral diplomacy to deal with adversaries. Apart from complete troop withdrawal from Iraq, the White House repeatedly curtailed its diplomatic presence and reduced its financial aid to the country. In Syria, while Obama avoided deeper involvement engaging troops on the ground, it engaged regional allies and local forces in the fight against ISIS with the aim of reducing costs and minimizing risks. Meanwhile, containment or regime change was substituted with multilateral sanctions and diplomacy in dealing with Iran, with the exclusive objective of preventing the country from developing the nuclear bomb.

While many critics have debated the essence of Obama’s Middle East policy, few have offered systematic explanations accounting for the determinants of Obama’s choices. When such explanations are debated, they often center on the conventional interpretation that Obama acted as an anti-Bush president or strove to avoid steering the country to another Iraq or Afghanistan. Even when such explanations are based on more nuanced interpretations, they are approached either from a purely domestic or international perspective. Looking at Obama’s Middle East strategy from a purely international angle would render domestic politics irrelevant in a democracy where the president and his entourage have much to say in foreign policy decisions. Likewise, disregarding the regional environment where much have changed in the last decade and where the U.S. is no longer the main player would at best provide simplistic answers to complex and intricate questions. The next two chapters would offer both parsimony and accuracy to account for Obama’s strategic retrenchment in the MiddleEast

# **Chapter Four**

## **International Explanations of Obama's Middle East Policy**

## **Introduction**

This chapter aims to explain the role of the international system on the change in American Middle East policy, and specifically the adoption of a retrenchment approach to the region by the Obama administration. While the U.S. entered a period of economic recession and relative decline, other rising powers were enjoying marked rates of economic growth. Changes in the international system were triggered not only by the rise of other states but also by the outbreak of social movements and the emergence of militant non-state actors that have rendered the international system a multiplex environment.

The argument that America's relative decline forced the new administration to put the American house in order and therefore limited the resources available to conduct an ambitious foreign policy, while true and accurate, is quite limited. Restoring a leading role of the country in a world fraught with competition and change was a key variable in Obama's foreign policy. To this end, the White House embarked on an 'internal balancing' process at home and strategic prioritizing abroad for the sake of balancing ends and means to restore the country's global preponderance. Such course directly affected what the U.S. could and should do in the Middle East.

While traditional internal balancing involves the increase in defense spending and the expansion of the military, Obama's one was pursued by military reform to make savings necessary for more critical sectors, like scientific research and cutting-edge technologies, that could enable the country to compete more effectively on the global stage. Such reform made the withdrawal of American troops deployed abroad and the eschewal of future military deployments a strategic imperative. Instead of resorting to costly military interventions to deter threats or protect interests, the new administration relied on less costly alternatives like multilateral diplomacy, economic sanctions, and surrogate warfare to deal with adversaries. Prioritizing American interests in the Middle East to devote more resources to the Asia Pacific was also meant to maintain leadership internationally with limited resources. While solving the Israeli-Palestinian issue, affecting political change in Iraq and Syria, and securing the region's natural resources were relegated, nonproliferation and the prevention of a nuclear Iran became an overarching and strategic objective. As the Middle East was increasingly seen as less strategically critical, the Asia Pacific figured as the hub of economic transformation and the future linchpin of global security. Boosting trade and economic partnership with U.S. allies in the region, assuring them of U.S. security commitments and making sure China

would continue to abide by the rules of the American-led international order were far larger and more consequential objectives than reforming Iraq or affecting regime change in Syria.

Relative decline did not necessarily preclude the ambition of influencing the direction of unfolding events to be more in line with American interests and preferences. When the social protests swept the Middle East the Obama administration was faced with the challenge of sustaining the rule of friendly regimes and was presented with the opportunity to influence the new directions of Middle East politics. Unlike the past experiences of Iraq or Libya, the Syria case proved to be far more complex and challenging. In this context, the White House was conducting its foreign policy in a regional environment made complex by the deep involvement of regional rivals and the rise of non-state actors whose agenda was discordant with that of the United States. Resorting to economical and less militaristic ways to achieve objectives was equally problematic. In the United Nations, Russia and China balked vehemently at what they saw as an interventionist American policy and worked to promote a more democratic governance in international affairs that reflects the shifting global distribution of power. Economic sanctions on the Syrian regime remained ineffective as Russia and Iran continued to be the military and financial lifeline for their ally in Damascus. The reliance on local armed groups was equally perplexing as the most effective forces were either allied with Assad and or were pursuing an 'extremist' and 'radical' political future for Syria.

### **3- Relative Decline, Foreign Policy Change and Retrenchment**

Obama came to office at a time of a financial crisis and two ongoing wars that overstretched the U.S. military, conditions that were harbingers of a new cycle of American decline. With limited resources, overextended international commitments, and the rise of others, the United States arrived at state of imbalance that threatened its preponderance. Such conditions spurred the new administration to reset priorities both at home and abroad to reverse, or at least mitigate, such imbalance. In consequence, foreign policy in general was relegated as cuts in sectors like defense limited what the country could do abroad for the sake of reviving the elements of power needed to better the country's competitive edge internationally. At the regional level of the Middle East, the Obama administration continued to put the region at arm's length and avoided any transformative agenda despite the developments that swept the region in recent years. Meanwhile, the Asia Pacific region became the focus of Obama foreign policy both for its prospects as a source of wealth for domestic revival and for security motives to help influence the changing security architecture of the region on which China seemed to have a strong sway.

#### **1-1 American Decline: The Present Debate**

Although the debate on American decline is not new, the one that was brought to the fore when President Obama took office is notable as it followed two costly wars and a financial crisis unprecedented since the Great Depression of 1929. Because of America's ability to recover from the latest wave of relative decline by the end of 1980s, along with the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a unipolar world led by the United States, critics have been cautious on how to approach the recent debate. While it is informative to revisit the debate after more than a decade of its beginning, it is more critical to question and gauge the extent to which such decline informed foreign policy making in the Obama years, especially towards the Middle East.

After more than two decades of writing his much-cited work on the *Rise and Fall of Great Powers* and his thesis of America's "imperial overstretch," Paul Kennedy still holds to the argument that America is in decline. In 1988, Kennedy argued that given America's worldwide liabilities and the financial difficulties it faced, its ability to sustain such



international commitments was certainly diminishing.<sup>480</sup> Today's decline is notable for involving all dimensions of American power, soft, economic and military, and represents a return of the U.S. back to normalcy from an exceptional superpower position to join the club as one of the great powers.<sup>481</sup>

At the soft power level, argues Kennedy, America's ability to influence others to do what is wants is diminishing and the political system and cultural norms that were once "American" are now common even among people who vehemently challenge American foreign policy and American interests. The growing deficit in state and federal budgets impedes the U.S. ability to compete internationally, and fuels a toxic political environment unable to respond effectively to such challenges. While the U.S. military remains unequaled in strength, it is rendered increasingly ineffective by three main challenges; not least of them is the inefficiency of its conventional force in the face of asymmetric warfare. Other powers, however, are bound to enjoy the same privileged position of the U.S. in the post-WW2 years and are challenging America's presence in many regions; Russia is exerting more influence on its backyard, India is likely to control the "Indian Ocean" in the next twenty years, and China, with its advanced maritime power, is pushing the U.S. navy away from the Asian waters. What is more critical, however, is the reliance of the Pentagon on foreign creditors to finance a growing budget deficit.<sup>482</sup>

America's power relative to its principal rival is worth noting. While the U.S. suffered from rising unemployment, growing deficit, and a decline in trust in the neoliberal order it created and nurtured, China enjoys huge cash surplus and a vibrant economy that looks for more natural resources. Such transformations spurred the Chinese government to pursue a more ambitious foreign policy to secure foreign markets and resources. Signs of such policy were manifest in the growing investment in military buildup, especially a strong navy that was expected to overtake that of the United States. In this regard, the Middle East has figured prominently as a region of strategic interest from where China imports 60 % of its oil.<sup>483</sup> China's stated approach of noninterference in the internal politics of others makes it a far more attractive choice for partnership. The reverse of the U.S. from being the world's first

---

<sup>480</sup> Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, 684

<sup>481</sup> Paul Kennedy, "Back to Normalcy: Is America Really in Decline," December 21, 2010, *New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/79753/normalcy-american-decline-decadence>

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Nicholas Kitchen and Michael Cox, "Obama nation? US foreign policy one year on: driving decline? Economic crisis and the rise of China" *LSE IDEAS*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 46-49 <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43591/>

creditor to the first debtor to China is clearly revealing of a redistribution of power away from the United States.<sup>484</sup>

Unlike the British Empire whose main factor of decline was economic, argues Fareed Zakaria, the American economy, compared to others, “remains fundamentally rigorous” and the real challenge lies in a dysfunctional political system that is unable to effectively respond to emerging challenges. In all the setbacks that threatened American power during the twentieth century, the state was able to recover and sustain a position of strength thanks to a political system that “proved to be flexible, resourceful, and resilient” and “able to correct its mistakes and shift its intentions.” Therefore, America’s main challenge is an “antiquated and overly rigid political system [that] has been captured by money [and] special interests.”<sup>485</sup>

Even the economic problems that face the country are deeply rooted in politics. Cuts in spending and the relocation of resources are largely ineffective as they are initiated in sectors with little waste or because they are politically less controversial. Cuts in education, scientific research, and infrastructure along with subsidizing housing and health are not only the wrong answer to decline, but they badly affect the long-term growth prospects of the economy.<sup>486</sup> While the world is experiencing profound changes with power moving away from the United States to other centers of power, or what Zakaria calls “the rise of the rest,” American elites have failed to respond by relinquishing some of their country’s privileges or by conceding to the emergence of a world with different viewpoints.<sup>487</sup> Because of a strong belief in exceptionalism fed by a pride in a glorious past, Americans are often loath to learn from others and are therefore slow to adapt to the changes sweeping the world around them. It was this very principle of adaptability and fear of decline that helped the country recover from crises in the past.<sup>488</sup>

Joseph Nye, though less pessimistic about America’s decline, argues that the real problem for the future of American power is less material and more political. Nye contends that in military terms, the U.S. will continue to be an unchallenged hegemon in the foreseeable future but will likely be less dominant economically thanks to the rise of new centers of economic activity in Europe and Asia. As for the case of China, which many observers

---

<sup>484</sup> Ibid

<sup>485</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “The Future of American Power: How America can Survive the Rise of the Rest,” *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 3 (May/June 2008): 40-41

<sup>486</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “Are America’s Best Days Behind Us,” *Time*, March 03, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2056723-1,00.html>

<sup>487</sup> Zakaria, *Future of American Power*, 43

<sup>488</sup> Zakaria, *America’s Best Days*

believe is the most serious challenger to American power, the picture is less grim. Nye believes that even if its power will match that of the US in quantity, it will still lag behind in quality and composition. Moreover, China will continue to face internal challenges emanating from domestic political contestation and external challenges posed by regional rivals mainly Japan and India. While the U.S. will likely suffer from a decline in absolute power, its strong and old alliances along with its ideology of flexibility will help sustain its power and competitiveness internationally.<sup>489</sup>

The real challenges to U.S. power, according to Nye, are both deeply psychological and political. Americans, ever since the beginning of the republic, are susceptible to the idea of decline either because of a mismatch between available resources and the expectations of what they can achieve, or because of an overestimation of the country's real power. At the political level, decision making in the American political system is diffused and often contested between the executive, Congress and an array of interest groups which sometimes hinder the formulation of a coherent policy. The real challenge, therefore, is not in the maximization of material resources, but rather in the formation of a policy that can use the available resources more effectively to compete and survive in a new environment where power is diffused among many state and non-state actors, and to deal with challenges that are increasingly less amenable to hard-power panacea.<sup>490</sup>

If reconnecting past and present events is ever useful to explain the state of American power and the direction of its foreign policy, the Iraq war, the 2008 financial crisis and the election of Donald Trump, argues Adam Tooze, have one common significance; the world is changing profoundly with American dominance on the wane.<sup>491</sup> While the European financial crisis of 2012 was widely accepted as a continuation of the one in 2008, the consensus that this crisis has ebbed away is an inaccurate assessment. Not only the crisis is in a state of "mutation and metastasis," but is largely responsible for the political and geopolitical crises that are sweeping the globe today, notable an "uncoordinated" Western alliance.<sup>492</sup>

Pessimists about American power, according to Robert Lieber, underestimate America's "resilience, the fundamental strengths and ability to overcome adversity." Despite the serious

---

<sup>489</sup> Joseph Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6, (November/December 2010)

<sup>490</sup> Ibid

<sup>491</sup> Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2018), 4-5

<sup>492</sup> Ibid, 20

challenges of debt, deficit and the high cost of entitlements, the United States remains a leading power in many areas of national power compared to others, especially China. Economically, the country's economy represent the fifth of the world's GDP, its GDP per capita is eight times that of China, the dollar remains the best choice of the world's reserve currency, and its markets receive the highest share of the world's good and services. In other forms of strength, or what is known as soft power, America's liberal values like democracy, the rule of law, popular sovereignty, continue to be the most attractive model of governance.<sup>493</sup>

Because decline is relative, it should be assessed not only against the power of other emerging states internationally but also in relation to the state's power in its recent past. Moreover, power should not be limited to its economic and political form, though such forms remain the most visible and determinant elements of power, but should extend to include the prestige and the trust the country enjoys abroad, which is also a determinant of how restrained decision makers would be in conducting foreign policy. Therefore, a fresh look and a multidimensional assessment of American power is needed as a starting point to assess how power informed the foreign policy making of the Obama administration.

## **1-2 America's Relative Decline in the Obama Years: A Fresh Assessment**

While other forms of power are strong indicators of the country's resources, economic might is perhaps the most tangible yardstick of the state's strength because it is "fungible" and can be easily converted in other forms like military strength or cultural influence. Although decline in other forms of power can induce retrenchment, economic decay is the most likely to be the primary cause and others the consequence.<sup>494</sup> Deficit, debt and the country's share of global GDP are the most frequently used indicators to gauge the economic strength of a state, but the persistence of the rise or decline in this strength is more informative about the state's economic performance. Because this study argues that foreign policy change occurred in the Obama years, a comparative assessment of American economic strength during both the Bush years and Obama's two terms in office would be very informative.

After a two-year surplus in 1999 and 2000, the federal budget returned back to a state of deficit of \$538 billion, 4.7 percent of GDP, at the height of the Iraq war in 2004. When

---

<sup>493</sup> Robert J. Lieber, "America in Decline? It's a Matter of Choices, not Fate," *World Affairs* 175, no. 3 (September/October 2012): 88-90

<sup>494</sup> MacDonald and Parent, *Graceful Decline*, 9-10

President Obama came to office in 2009, and with the onset of financial crisis, the gap widened remarkably and reached an all-time high figure of \$ 1.5 trillion, 10.8 percent of GDP. Although the deficit slowly fell to \$621 billion, 3.4 percent of GDP, by the end of the Obama presidency, it never went back to its state at the beginning of the millennium.<sup>495</sup> The Congressional Budget Office estimates that such deficit would continue to be the norm and is likely to reach \$1.3 trillion, 4.9 percent of GDP, by 2026.<sup>496</sup>

While the deficit fluctuated and remains mostly within more or less historical standards, federal debt held by the public has been continuously soaring. The relative decline of the deficit can be explained mostly by the rise in debt which is used to bridge the gap between revenues and spending. When President Obama came to office in 2009, such debt was \$7.5 trillion, 52 percent of GDP, and rose to \$ 11 trillion by the beginning of his second term in office and reached \$ 14 trillion, 77 percent of GDP, by the end of his presidency. What makes the case of debt in the last two decades stands out from other periods of perceived decline is not only its persistency, but rather the pace of its growth. Debt held by the public rose by more than three times between 2000 and 2011 and by more than four times from 2000 and 2016.<sup>497</sup> The Congressional Budget Office projected the rise of public debt to more than \$23 trillion by 2026, which is more than 85 percent of GDP.<sup>498</sup>

Apart from being a burden on the American treasury, debt has far-reaching economic implications. As debts grow, so do interests rates that usually come with them, which were projected to rise proportionately. In consequence, the American government will be forced to borrow more than \$5 trillion annually to finance both the deficit and pay for debt services. Moreover, public savings that would have otherwise directed to investment, the primary source of wealth creation, are usually used to finance sectors like housing, health and defense. This will therefore diminish productive capital, slow down economic growth, and affect public standards of living.<sup>499</sup>

Debt held by foreigners, in the form of treasury securities, is yet another issue of concern which is closely connected to the national security of the country, especially when held by

---

<sup>495</sup> “Historical Budget Data,” *Congressional Budget Office*(CBO), <https://www.cbo.gov/about/products/budget-economic-data#2>

<sup>496</sup> “Updated Budget Projections,” *Congressional Budget Office*, <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/114th-congress-2015-2016/reports/51384-marchbaselineonecol.pdf>

<sup>497</sup> CBO, *Historical Budget Data*

<sup>498</sup> CBO, *Updated Budget Projections*

<sup>499</sup> Roger C. Altman and Richard Haass, “American Profligacy and American Power: The Consequences of Fiscal Irresponsibility,” *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6 (November/December 2010): 27-28

China. With the advantageous exception of owning the world's reserve currency, the United States is now in a position that is typical of developing countries which incur deficit and debt because of their weak exports and borrowed capital to finance investment. Conversely, developing countries are now the major holders of American treasury securities. One possible implication of this rising debt is that these creditors will lose faith in the American financial system and will at best demand higher interest rates.<sup>500</sup> Debt held by foreigners, the bulk of which is held by China and Japan, rose from \$1 trillion in 2000, to \$3.6 trillion in 2009 and to \$6 trillion in 2016. In 2009, China replaced Japan as the first creditor to the U.S. with the former holding \$894 billion and the latter \$765 billion. In 2016, China held more than 1\$ trillion of the total treasury securities held by foreigners.<sup>501</sup>

In its report of December 2010, the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform appointed by the Obama administration warned about “a looming fiscal crisis” and its future implications. According to the report, the growing deficit and debt was the result of the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fiscal policies adopted by the Bush administration and the economic downturn that hit the country in 2008. The report eventually proved right in its assessment that even if the economy recovered, the deficit would continue and the government would still need to borrow to finance it. With an aging population and the rising price of entitlements, revenues would be able to finance only healthcare, social security, and interest payments, and all other government spending would have to be paid for by borrowed money which would also affect the government's ability to respond to future crises. The report also warned that the United States runs the risk of being exposed to foreign creditors, especially China, “a nation that may not share our country's aspirations and strategic interests.”<sup>502</sup>

Despite the relative recovery of the economy, America's share of global GDP, based on purchasing power parity, continued to decline and China overtook the U.S as the world's largest economy in 2014. According to the International Monetary Fund, America's share of the world's economy fell from 20.46 percent in 2000 to 17.21 percent in 2009 and to 15.5 in 2016, and was projected to go down to 13.91 percent by 2023. China's share, on the other

---

<sup>500</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>501</sup> “Major Foreign Holder of Treasury Securities,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, <https://ticdata.treasury.gov/Publish/mfh.txt>

<sup>502</sup> “The National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform: The Moment of Truth,” *The White House*, December 2010,10-11 [https://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/NationalCommissiononFiscalResponsibilityandReform\\_Dec012010.pdf](https://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/NationalCommissiononFiscalResponsibilityandReform_Dec012010.pdf)

hand, rose from only 7.41 percent in 2000 to 15.26 percent in 2016 and was projected to reach 20.97 percent by 2023.<sup>503</sup>

In economic terms, American public perceptions about their country's power reflect the reality as more Americans see China as the leading economic power rather than the United States. According to a Pew Research poll, 41 percent of Americans polled in 2008 believed the United States is the leading economic power compared to 30 percent who thought it was China. In 2013, Americans expressed the reverse with 48 percent believed China is the leading world's economy compared to 31 percent who think it is the United States. Even at the level of experts, 62 percent of members of the Council on Foreign Relations polled in 2013 believed that American power has declined compared to 44 percent who expressed the same view in 2009.<sup>504</sup>

Public opinion around the world follows the same declinist trend as many think China has replaced or would replace the United States as the world's superpower. This view is widespread even in countries deemed allies to the United States, especially in Western Europe. A Pew research poll in 2011 found that more than 70 percent in France and more than 60 percent in Spain, Britain and Germany believed China has replaced or will replace the U.S. as the world's leading power. At the level of the economy, only 22 percent in Spain and 28 percent in Germany named China the leading economic power in 2009 compared to 49 percent and 48 percent in 2011. More people in Middle Eastern countries like Jordan and Lebanon hold the same view, but majorities in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia think the U.S is still the leading economic power.<sup>505</sup>

These fiscal and economic difficulties were seen by analysts and policy makers as threats not only to the standards of living of average Americans, but also to America's place in the world, its ability to compete internationally and even to its national security. The report of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform concluded that "America cannot be great if we are broke" and that the country's "economic and national security depend on us putting our fiscal house in order." Therefore, investment in strategic sectors like,

---

<sup>503</sup> "GDP based on PPP, share of the world," *International Monetary Fund*, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>

<sup>504</sup> "Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips," *Pew Research Center*, December 2013, <https://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>

<sup>505</sup> "China Seen Overtaking U.S. as Global Superpower," *Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes and Trends*, July 13, 2011, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/13/china-seen-overtaking-us-as-global-superpower/>

infrastructure, education and research and development is vital not only to help the economy recover, but would also keep the country “globally competitive.”<sup>506</sup>

The President of the Council on Foreign Relations concluded that “the biggest threat to America’s security and prosperity comes not from abroad but from within.” Because of poor investment in strategic sectors, two costly wars, and a financial crisis, the country “jeopardized its ability to act effectively in the world.”<sup>507</sup> Shortcomings at home like deficit, debt, slow economic growth and poor infrastructure “directly threaten America’s ability to project power and exert influence overseas, to compete in the global marketplace, to generate the resources needed to promote the full range of U.S. interests abroad, and to set a compelling example that will influence the thinking and behavior of others.”<sup>508</sup> This mismatch between ends and resources means that the US ability to act and lead internationally is declining. This is further exacerbated by the rise of many powers that are performing better than the United States in many regards.<sup>509</sup>

Niall Ferguson contends that the United States is run with a fiscal policy of “a world war without a war” which would inevitably lead to a fiscal crisis that, given America’s global reach and superpower status, could trigger a shift in the entire international balance of economic power. Therefore, maintaining military predominance is directly connected to the government’s ability to manage resources effectively. The United States is taking the same trajectory that led to the decline of previous empires, which “begins with a debt explosion [and] ends with an exorable reduction in the resources available for the Army, Navy and Air Force.”<sup>510</sup>

Along with such diminished material resources, the U.S. has suffered from a decline in trust in its policies and intentions among the public of even its closest allies. With the onset of Bush’s ‘war on terror’ and the invasion of Iraq, people in Western Europe and the Middle East expressed concerns about the direction of American foreign policy and the use of American power, viewing the United States as a self-interested hegemon hell-bent on getting what it wants with sheer disregard of others’ views and interests. Between 2000 and 2008, favorable views of the United States declined from 83 percent to 53 percent in Britain and

---

<sup>506</sup> *National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility*, 12

<sup>507</sup> Richard Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America’s House in Order* (U.S: Basic Books, 2013), p1.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>510</sup> Niall Ferguson, “An Empire at Risk,” *Journalism*, December 14, 2009, <http://www.niallferguson.com/journalism/finance-economics/an-empire-at-risk>



from 78 percent to 31 percent in Germany. In 2008, only 12 percent in Turkey, 22 percent in Egypt and 19 percent in Jordan expressed positive views of the United States. An increasing number of people considered American military presence in the Middle East posing more danger to the region's stability than the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>511</sup>

Despite Obama's lofty rhetoric about a 'new beginning' between the United States and the Muslim world, the American image in the Middle East continued to suffer well into the president's second term in office. In 2013, a Pew Research survey found that more than 80 percent of respondents in Egypt and Jordan and 70 percent in Turkey expressed unfavorable views about the U.S. While the U.S. looks at some countries in the region as key allies and partners, the majority of people in these countries do not share the same perception. In Turkey for example, 49 percent of the respondents consider the U.S. an enemy while 54 percent in Jordan and 43 percent in Egypt consider it neither an enemy nor a partner.<sup>512</sup> While the U.S. fared better than China among the Europeans and Latin Americans, more people expressed favorable views about China than the U.S.<sup>513</sup>

Beyond the relevance of deficit and debt to the issue of American decline, what is much less arguable is that U.S. financial conditions became worse than they were before and this triggered changes in domestic policy that directly influenced the trajectory of foreign policy, most notably the spending cuts that diminished the resources available to the conduct of a robust and ambitious foreign policy. Obama's policy was therefore "one of strategic response to structural change," driven by the belief that the previous administration's costly policy, evident in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, distracted the country from more underlying transformations taking place in the international system.<sup>514</sup>

In consequence, relative decline influenced American foreign policy making under Obama in two main ways, one is conventional and the other is rather nuanced. From a realist perspective, the diminishing resources limited the choices of what the country can do abroad and more importantly triggered a reformulation of foreign policy objectives. Such

---

<sup>511</sup> "Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001-2008)," *Pew Research Center*, December 18, 2008, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2008/12/18/global-public-opinion-in-the-bush-years-2001-2008/>

<sup>512</sup> "America's Global Image Remains More Positive than China's, Chapter 1: Attitudes towards the United States," *Pew Research Center*, July 18, 2013, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/chapter-1-attitudes-toward-the-united-states/>

<sup>513</sup> "Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America's Image," *Pew Research Center*, July 14, 2014, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/global-opposition-to-u-s-surveillance-and-drones-but-limited-harm-to-americas-image/>

<sup>514</sup> Nickolas Kitchen, "Structural Shifts and Strategic Change: From the War on Terror to the Pivot to Asia," in *Obama's Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror*, ed. Michelle Bentley and Jack Hoolland. (USA: Routledge, 2014), 68.

‘moderation’ of objectives made the protection of core national and security and interests the primary concern while other liberal transformational agendas that formed the essence of the previous administration’s foreign policy were ignored.<sup>515</sup> A more subtle way in which relative decline influenced Obama foreign policy is by making the preservation of a U.S. hegemonic position an ultimate objective that can be attained not by an expansive foreign policy, but one characterized by retrenchment and restraint. Such approach was pursued by making economic revival at a home, at the expense of an ambitious foreign policy, an objective by which the country would be better-positioned to lead and compete internationally. Prioritizing the Asia Pacific was in itself a means to for this end to harness the region’s growing wealth to generate resources and to balance against a growing China with its prospects of jeopardizing U.S. hegemony. With so much to do at home and in the Asia Pacific, the Middle East, while still central to U.S. foreign policy calculus, would receive far less attention and resources compared to the previous administration.

### **1-3 Relative Decline, Strategic Prioritizing and Retrenchment**

It was under such economic and financial imperatives that the Obama administration instigated a foreign policy change towards retrenchment which was pursued primarily through a rearrangement of policy priorities at three levels. Between the domestic and the foreign by directing the available resources to put the American house in order mainly to make the country better-positioned to compete internationally. Such course was pursued through cutting spending and reallocating resources between sectors, away from areas deemed less productive to others that promoted investment with long-term benefits. At the regional level of the Middle East, the Obama White House narrowed down the scope of national interests by focusing on more urgent threats to such interests and by resisting any costly or transformational agenda. At the international level, more time and resources were directed to regions of more strategic interest, namely the Asia-Pacific region and away from places that dissipated many resources in the last decade but generated less than optimal gains.

#### **1-3-1 Stronger at Home, Competitive Abroad: ‘Internal Balancing’ Revisited**

In a context of an ailing economy and diminishing resources, the Obama administration formulated a policy on the basis that resolving domestic problems was a priority that trumped

---

<sup>515</sup> Adam Quinn, “Realism and U.S Foreign Policy,” in *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge(New York, Routledge: 2014), 6

all others and that the country cannot compete and lead internationally if it is weak domestically. Therefore, Obama embarked on an “*internal balancing*” process which aimed to build stronger foundations that would make the country better-positioned to act in a world where power is increasingly diffused among many states and non-state actors. While at home the resources were reallocated from sectors deemed less productive like defense, which in turn impacted what the country could do abroad, less costly instruments of conducting foreign policy were prioritized like engaging adversaries, strengthening alliances, building new partnerships, and relying more on diplomacy and cooperation to promote interests and deter threats.

In the American context, internal balancing is different from its traditional sense in two ways. While the process is usually common among states, weak or strong, in response to hegemonic threats<sup>516</sup>, it is adopted by the United States as a hegemon in response to relative decline and hegemonic transition. Although China and other rising powers are yet to match U.S. military preponderance, they would sooner or later do so thanks to their growing economies and in case the United States continued to be overextended abroad and underinvested at home. Therefore, the shortcut to preserving a hegemonic position should start by working on areas where the U.S. is lagging behind, mainly the economy and the country’s prestige and image internationally. Moreover, military buildup, in the form of “the creation or aggregation of military power” is the common pattern in traditional internal balancing.<sup>517</sup> As America’s rivals still lag behind in conventional military force, the Obama administration made military reform, through adapting the military to new and more urgent challenges, the best way to maintain the Pentagon’s competitive edge at a time of fiscal constraints. What is evident in these internal balancing acts is that they were pursued at the expense of an expansive and ambitious foreign policy.

It was through giving the state department the leeway to conduct but not to decide foreign policy that Obama spared the presidency the needed time to deal with more urgent matters at home. The choice of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State was born out of the belief that she was “a world figure” who was “an ambassador on her own right” and who did not have “to

---

<sup>516</sup> Zoltan Buzas, “How Nationalism Helps Internal Balancing but Hurts External Balancing: The Case of East Asia,” *Center for International Peace and Security Studies*, September 19, 2014, p4,

[http://gnss.mcgill.ca/files/CIPSS\\_Buzas%20-%20Working%20Paper%2043.pdf](http://gnss.mcgill.ca/files/CIPSS_Buzas%20-%20Working%20Paper%2043.pdf)

<sup>517</sup> Ibid.

earn the stripes.”<sup>518</sup> She was also perceived to be the right person to take on responsibilities when the American troops were still in Iraq and Afghanistan and at a time of “great uncertainty” in terms of how the United States could reform its relations around the world. In an interview with Steve Kroft of CBS, Hillary Clinton noted that she assumed the task of leading foreign affairs on the principle that the president had to deal with an economic recession at home and that he was “not going to be able to do a lot to satisfy the built-up expectations for our role around the world.”<sup>519</sup>

In his inaugural address, Obama devoted most of its narrative to an “economy that is badly weakened” to “sapping confidence” among the public and to a widespread fear that “America’s decline is inevitable.”<sup>520</sup> By prioritizing the domestic, Obama set high ambitions to build the “foundations of growth” through investing in sectors with long time gains like renewable energy, scientific research and education. Internationally, however, he called for a more “prudent” use of power when dealing with the world because America’s security “emanates from the justness of our cause,” and the “qualities of humility and restraint.” While he distanced himself from his predecessor’s foreign policy that was driven by narrow American interests and the use of force, he acknowledged the limits of what American power can do to solve global problems and called for more cooperation between nations.<sup>521</sup>

Prioritizing domestic matters was not an end in itself but a means to project power and influence abroad. This correlation between the domestic and the foreign was a recurring theme in Obama’s discourse. In a commencement address at West Point in 2010, Obama noted that America’s “strength and influence abroad begins with steps we take at home” because “at no time in human history has a nation of diminished economic vitality maintained its military and political primacy.”<sup>522</sup> He also noted the limits of the American military to protect American interests abroad and called for the integration of other sources of influence like economic power, diplomacy, development expertise and intelligence. This burden-sharing principle is not limited to domestic sources of power, but also to others

---

<sup>518</sup>“Interview of President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton with Steve Kroft of CBS’s ‘60 Minutes’,” *The American Presidency Project*, January 27, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-president-obama-and-secretary-state-clinton-with-steve-kroft-cbss-60-minutes>

<sup>519</sup>Ibid

<sup>520</sup> Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address,” *The American Presidency Project*, January 20, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-5>

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> Barack Obama, “Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York,” *The American Presidency Project*, May 22, 2010, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-the-united-states-military-academy-west-point-new-york-2>

around the world. As influence is increasingly diffused to other actors and regions, and as the United States “has not succeeded by stepping out of the currents of cooperation,” it should rather work to strengthen old alliances and seek to build new partnerships.<sup>523</sup> The change in American foreign policy was also initiated with the recognition of a change in American leadership, away from that the U.S enjoyed after the Second World War based on an unrivaled economic strength to one that recognizes the rise of others like China, India and Brazil. Therefore, for the United States to restore a leading role in world affairs, it should aim for a foreign policy that is “anchored in economic strength.”<sup>524</sup>

The National Security Strategy of 2010 highlighted the same line of thought, that the United States was in an era of diminished resources and that projecting influence abroad would come primarily from building stronger economic foundations at home. As the fiscal and trade deficits were primary factors behind the recession, making “hard choices” to put the country “on a fiscally sustainable path” was inevitable to rebuild the economy. These choices would include “setting priorities and making tradeoffs among competing programs and activities.”<sup>525</sup> The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance advised for a “Smart Defense” approach in a “resource-constrained era” and at a time when the “balance between available resources and our security needs have never been more delicate.”<sup>526</sup> The guidance noted that American forces would “no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations” and therefore “non-military means and military to military cooperation” would be prioritized to “reduce the demand for significant U.S. force commitments to stability operations.”<sup>527</sup> To achieve security objectives more generally, the Pentagon called for the development of “innovative, low-cost and small foot-print approaches” and this include “relying on exercises, rotational presence and advisory capabilities.”<sup>528</sup>

Limiting defense spending and directing resources towards activities of higher priority was also a response to this state of limited resources. The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review noted that the defense budget of 2010 was meant to “direct resources away from lower-priority programs and activities so that more pressing needs could be addressed,” an approach

---

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup>“Interview with Fareed Zakaria of Time Magazine,” January 19, 2012, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-fareed-zakaria-time-magazine>

<sup>525</sup> “National Security Strategy,” *White House*, May 2010, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2010.pdf> , p10

<sup>526</sup> “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense”, (2012). *U.S. Department of Defense*, 3, [http://archive.defense.gov/news/defense\\_strategic\\_guidance.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf)

<sup>527</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>528</sup> Ibid, 3

that would also guide future defense budgets.<sup>529</sup> The Defense Budget of 2014 also “reflects the difficult choices involved with protecting America’s security interests and role as a global power at a time of declining budgets and ongoing fiscal uncertainty about the future.” Such decline in defense spending “led to significant ongoing and planned reductions in military modernization, force structure, personnel costs, and overhead expenditures.”<sup>530</sup>

The Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011 was a step towards reducing the deficit through setting limits on defense and nondefense spending, aiming to reduce the deficit by \$1.5 trillion from 2012 to 2021. The Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction was established to oversee the process and was authorized to trigger a sequestration mechanism to automatically reduce spending if it exceeds the limits set by law or in case Congress or the President did not approve a bill to reduce the deficit. Some programs, however, are exempt from this sequestration process including Social Security and Medicare.<sup>531</sup>

The BCA was formulated with the objective to reduce defense spending by \$487 billion between 2012 and 2021. If real term growth of the costs in personnel, healthcare, and procurement is taken into account, such reductions would represent “marked decrease” in defense spending compared to the previous decade. The sequestration mechanism triggered by the BCA induced an 18 percent decline in defense spending between 2010 and 2014 and would require cuts by \$50 billion each year through 2021. To realize these reductions, the defense department targeted activities that would “yield the most immediate savings” like modernization programs, training, and maintenance. In substance, 30 modernization programs were cancelled between 2009 and 2011, the active army was projected to decline by 76000 and the active marine corps by 20000 by FY2017. As opposed to traditional internal balancing which calls for an increase in military force, the Pentagon aimed instead to shift the U.S. military to a “smaller, leaner force that is agile, flexible and ready to deploy quickly.”<sup>532</sup>

These reductions were in line with the President’s modest retrenchment approach which was marked by the drawdown of forces from the Middle East and the resistance to their future redeployment. The withdrawal of forces from Iraq and Afghanistan made “substantial

---

<sup>529</sup> “Quadrennial Defense Review Report,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, February 2010, <https://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf>

<sup>530</sup> “Defense Budget Priorities and Choices Fiscal Year 2014,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, April 2013, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/DefenseBudgetPrioritiesChoicesFiscalYear2014.pdf>

<sup>531</sup> Grant A. Driessen and Megan S. Lynch, “The Budget Control Act: Frequently Asked Questions,” *CRS*, February 23, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44874.pdf>

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*

savings” possible and was pursued despite the security challenges posed by “Iran, international terrorism and other adversaries.”<sup>533</sup> The department of defense acknowledged that even before the sequestration took effect, “the military services struggled to meet regional commanders’ requests for forces, especially carriers, destroyers, and amphibious capabilities for deployment near the Middle East and Asia-Pacific.” The Department also noted that it would aim for “reducing force structure in areas of lower risk to sustain other, higher priority capabilities.”<sup>534</sup>

The debate around keeping a residual force of around 10000 troops in Iraq was also influenced by the “the politics of the deficit.”<sup>535</sup> Despite the low cost of such option compared to the number of troops deployed during the invasion and the surge, the White House decision of complete withdrawal was, at least in part, informed by budgetary concerns. The rule of thumb was “the lower the number, the greater the claimed savings.”<sup>536</sup> Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies concluded that pressures emanating from the cost and size of force result in a tendency “to rely on sudden and temporary ‘surges’” and “the use of short rotations and temporary personnel.” It was these pressures that led the Obama administration to “quickly” withdraw forces from Iraq and Afghanistan without improvement in the security situation and in the absence of a reliable local force. When instability emerged, the administration, propelled by the same fiscal pressures, was reluctant to deploy the required number of forces except on a “creeping incremental” manner and after it appeared that local forces faced irreversible challenges and risks.<sup>537</sup>

The problem of resources was time and again invoked as a reason for downsizing commitments or abstaining from embracing new ones in the Middle East. President Obama noted that withdrawing troops from Iraq is in the interest not only of Iraq but also of the United States after paying a “huge price” of “enormous sacrifices” and “vast resources” at a time “of tight budgets at home.”<sup>538</sup> The security commitments made by the Obama

---

<sup>533</sup> *Defense Budget Priorities*, 2

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid*, 5

<sup>535</sup> Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The End Game: the Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (UK: Atlantic Books, 2012), p 668

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>537</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, “U.S. Military Spending: The Cost of Wars,” *CSIS*, July 10, 2017, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170710\\_Cost\\_War\\_AHC.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170710_Cost_War_AHC.pdf)

<sup>538</sup> Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq,” *The American Presidency Project*, August 31, 2010, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-end-combat-operations-iraq>



administration to Iraq at the beginning of his presidency, namely training and advising Iraqi security forces, were soon revoked due to the rising cost of life support services.

In the case of Syria, General Martin Dempsey assessed that every available option, from a no-fly zone to a buffer zone or the training of the Syrian opposition, would require thousands of troops and cost billions of dollars. In case the Syrian regime fell, the U.S. would also have to invest heavily in costly post-conflict stabilizing operations or to support a new government that is in line with its preferences.<sup>539</sup> In the campaign against ISIS, President Obama warned against “a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria” and that if the United States is driven in the region again, ISIS “can maintain insurgencies for years, killing thousands of our troops, draining our resources, and using our presence to draw new recruits.”<sup>540</sup>

Such cost pressure was also behind the President’s “burden-sharing” approach in dealing with the Syrian crisis and the campaign against ISIS. While his administration abstained from directly arming and funding the Syrian opposition, it encouraged and sometimes coordinated the efforts of its allies in the Gulf to do so. In the campaign against ISIS, the U.S. helped form an international coalition of 60 countries, 12 of which were directly involved in military operations. On the ground, local forces, especially non-state actors like the Kurds in of Syria and the Peshmerga in Iraq, were in the frontlines of the fight, while the role of coalition forces was confined to training and advisory missions.<sup>541</sup>

### **1-3-2 Reprioritizing National Interests and Objectives in the Middle East**

With much to do at home at a time of limited resources, the Obama administration reprioritized American national interests in the Middle East and aimed to address only the most urgent threats to such interests. Obama had to deal with the region not only under the condition of relative decline fueled by deficit, debt, and the rise of regional powers, but also in an increasingly anti-American environment that renders every task harder to realize. Narrowing down national interests went beyond even what pessimists about American power had recommended. In response to his critics on dealing with the Iranian nuclear program in isolation from what was perceived to be its destabilizing activities in the region, Obama asserted that “it’s not the job of the president of the United States to solve every problem in the Middle East” and that some of the problems can only be solved by people of the region.

---

<sup>539</sup> *Deputy Secretary of Defense Speech*

<sup>540</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Address to the Nation by the President,” *The White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/06/address-nation-president>

<sup>541</sup> See the section in the previous chapter titled “Low-Cost Alternatives for Intervention”



Solving problems in the region is not in the power of the United States alone, and allies and adversaries alike should pull their weight. In a move that was only recently unthinkable, the President admitted that Iranian cooperation is indispensable to solve some problems like the situation in Iraq and Syria.<sup>542</sup>

Obama's Middle East policy was also driven by his perception that international concerns like climate change, terrorism, and nonproliferation should take precedence over competition for geopolitical and regional influence with China, Russia and Iran.<sup>543</sup> Moreover, Obama perceived the region as less strategically vital than the previous presidents, especially in the two decades following the end of the Cold War. In that period, the relative stability of Europe and Asia allowed Washington to devote more attention and resources to the Middle East, but the recent developments in the two regions put them higher in the hierarchy of the President's foreign policy priorities.<sup>544</sup>

In an eighteen-months study by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution in 2008 that aimed to find ways to "restoring the balance" in the Middle East, scholars concluded that U.S. policy in the region should undergo both reprioritization and reorientation. The new administration should put the prevention of Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons at the heart of its strategy and that all other interests and objectives should work to facilitate such overall priority. The country's resources should be redirected away from Iraq by gradually reducing troop presence, a move that would relieve the burden on the military and give the president the leverage to back his diplomacy with Iran with the "credible" use of force. Promoting peace between the Israelis and the Arab states, especially with Syria, would weaken Tehran and its regional proxies and can also be used as leverage in the nuclear talks. More importantly, the United States should also work on the basis that "energy policy is foreign policy" because continued dependence on the region's oil would put

---

<sup>542</sup> "Full Text: Obama's News Conference on the Iran Nuclear Deal," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm\\_term=.7420c337063f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm_term=.7420c337063f)

<sup>543</sup> Martin Indyk, "The End of the U.S.-Dominated Order in the Middle East," *Brookings*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/03/15/the-end-of-the-u-s-dominated-order-in-the-middle-east/>

<sup>544</sup> Derek Chollet, Ellen Laipson, Michael Doran, and Michael Mandelbaum, "Does the Middle East still Matter: The Obama Doctrine and U.S. Policy," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/does-the-middle-east-still-matter-the-obama-doctrine-and-u.s.-policy>

Iran in a stronger position and would leave the United States exposed to the unforeseen developments in the region.<sup>545</sup>

While President Obama made the conclusion of a nuclear deal with Iran his highest priority, the drawdown of troops went beyond what some close advisers and the Pentagon recommended. These latter advised for a more gradual drawdown and pressed for a residual force, a choice the president resisted in order to pay more attention to the war in Afghanistan. Arriving to energy independence was also made the focus of his policy to reduce the country's vulnerability to unstable international oil markets. At the level of peace in the Middle East, the developments in Syria were soon to dash hopes of peace talks between Syria and Israel and the short-lived talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians ceased to receive the president's attention. What was stated to be Bush's integral aim of his war in Iraq, to help nurture a democracy that would be an example to others in the region, was given up for the sake of security.

Energy independence was made a key priority because it would address both the domestic challenge of deficit and the national security dilemma of relying on unstable oil markets. The National Security Strategy of 2010 set a strong link between the dependence on foreign oil and the national security of the United States. Such dependence would require a costly endeavor to secure the flow of oil to the international market and would make the country vulnerable to "energy supply disruptions and manipulations and changes in the environment on an unprecedented scale."<sup>546</sup> Along with the White House policy to encourage cleaner sources of energy and to increase domestic oil production, the department of defense also noted its continued investment in its energy security to reduce operational risks and costs. Because its growing energy consumption limits its ability to perform effectively, the Pentagon planned to increase its investment in alternative energy sources, to make energy plans part of any future development projects, and to introduce cost-effective engines for the air force and the navy.<sup>547</sup>

In this context of energy independence, the Obama presidency saw the largest increase in domestic oil production in American history, from 5.8 million barrel per day (bpd) in 2008 to 9.4 million bpd in 2015. Oil imports also fell by 60% in the same period from 11.1 million

---

<sup>545</sup>Richard N. Haass and Martin Indyk, *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President* (Washington D.C., Brookings and CFR, 2008)

<sup>546</sup>*National Security Strategy*, p30.

<sup>547</sup>*Defense Budget Priorities*, 31

bpd in 2008 to 4.7 million bpd in 2015. Such decline was the direct result not of the increase in renewable energy production but rather in the boom in shale oil drilling.<sup>548</sup> By 2013, the United States also became the first producer of natural gas internationally. The Obama administration allocated the largest budget to the investment in clean energy compared to previous administrations, an effort that helped increase solar power by 20 times wind power by 3 times.<sup>549</sup>

Such increase in domestic energy production has been a strategic asset both at home and abroad. The fall in oil imports helped reduce energy spending and reduced the trade deficit by \$250 billion. Internationally, being the first oil and gas producer helped relieve the Russian pressure on America's allies in Europe and spared the State Department the time to deal with more pressing issues abroad. More importantly, the decline in oil prices, from a peak of \$133 per barrel in 2008 to \$31 per barrel in 2016, was instrumental in pressing Iran during the nuclear talks. American oil production also helped cover the deficit in oil supply to the international market caused by the sanctions imposed on Iran. Despite such strategic benefits, Middle Eastern oil remains indispensable to America's allies in Europe and Japan and the U.S. would continue to have a stake in the stability of oil producers in the region.<sup>550</sup>

Driven by the same concern of limited time and resources, the Obama administration made the arrival at a nuclear deal with Iran the most urgent priority in the Middle East because solving any other Iranian challenge would be harder to achieve if Tehran has the nuclear bomb. According to the president, such was the priority not only of the American presidency, but also of the American people, Democrats, Republicans, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and America's allies in the Gulf.<sup>551</sup> While reaching a nuclear deal was made a priority, dealing with other Iranian activities perceived to be destabilizing would be pursued by "conservations" which would "incentivize [Iran] to behave differently in the region." While admittedly Iran might well use the money it gets from lifting the sanctions to finance its military activities, the President noted that it all comes down to prioritizing; the United

---

<sup>548</sup> Robert Rapier, "The Irony of President Obama's Oil Legacy," *Forbes*, January 15, 2016,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2016/01/15/president-obamas-petroleum-legacy/#1c075580c10f>

<sup>549</sup> "Advancing American Energy," *The White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/energy/securing-american-energy>

<sup>550</sup> Keith Johnson, "Why American Oil Hasn't Been a Total Game Changer," *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2008, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/14/why-american-oil-hasnt-been-a-total-game-changer/>

<sup>551</sup> "Full Text: Obama's News Conference on the Iran Nuclear Deal," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm\\_term=.7420c337063f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm_term=.7420c337063f)

States cannot solve all the problems, but should direct its resources to what is most urgent and fundamental.<sup>552</sup>

In his statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Undersecretary for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman cited a list of threats and challenges that would be posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. The scope of challenges is not only regional, but also global as it would imperil the international nuclear nonproliferation regime. Iran armed with nuclear weapons would induce other regional powers to follow the same trajectory, thereby triggering a regional nuclear arms race. Such capability would also encourage the Iranian regime to seek more influence and control in the region and pose dire risks to Israel, America's closest regional ally. Wendy noted that it was such array of threats that were behind Obama's resolve to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran through the use of all the elements of American power. While the Obama administration decided to invest most of its resources on such endeavor, it continued so stress that the ultimate objective is not a regime change in Tehran, but rather to induce a change in its behavior.<sup>553</sup>

In his remarks following the conclusion of the nuclear deal in July 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry noted that prioritizing the objective of Iran without nuclear weapons relates to every other security challenge in the region. As the "stakes" in reaching this objective were "so high," every decision made during the negotiations "affects global and regional security so directly."<sup>554</sup> Kerry cited repeatedly the possibilities of what would happened without such agreement, most notably that every threat posed by Iran would be worse. Therefore, the most remarkable achievement of this deal is that it deprives Tehran from both the military deterrence and the political leverage it would use in dealing with the West on other outstanding matters.<sup>555</sup>

As working for energy independence and an Iran nuclear deal were prioritized, promoting peace between the Israelis and Arab states and democracy in the region were relegated despite the exalting rhetoric of President Obama to do otherwise. Shadi Hamid contends that because "political capital and bandwidth" are not infinite resources and that policy making is all about prioritizing, Obama chose to give the Iran deal his "overwhelming focus" and to make it a priority that "took precedence over nearly everything else." In the process, many

---

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Sherman, *How We Got*

<sup>554</sup> John Kerry, "Press Availability on Nuclear Deal with Iran," *U.S. Department of State*, July 14, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/07/244885.htm>

<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

other policy objectives were compromised and when pursued, the outcomes were less than optimal.<sup>556</sup>

While President Obama did not commit to revive the negotiations between Israel and Syria, his initial enthusiasm to arrive at peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians withered away in the face of political realities. In his memoir after leaving office, John Kerry recalled that President Assad asked him what should be done to revive peace talks with Israel. Kerry suggested making an official proposal, a step that Assad took by sending a letter to President Obama the content of which surprised even Benjamin Netanyahu for the concessions it made. What Obama asked for as “confidence-building measures” like cutting off aid to Hezbollah were believed to get in the way of making any progress.<sup>557</sup>

On the Israeli-Palestinian peace track, when the Obama administration’s efforts to reset the peace talks seemed to demand more resources than expected, Obama disengaged from the process. The president’s lofty rhetoric about the possibility of arriving at peace between the two sides was not followed by tangible commitments and the decision to disengage from the talks, argues Fawaz Gerges, “speaks volumes about the administration’s foreign policy priorities, as well as the decline of American power and influence in the region.”<sup>558</sup> Given the political climate between the two sides in the talks and their unwillingness to make concessions, Obama showed little interest in committing “presidential capital in a situation that seemed destined to stagnation.”<sup>559</sup>

The change in the administration’s stance towards condemning the Israeli settlement in the West Bank in the UN Security Council is revealing of the change in its commitments to the peace talks. The first veto of the U.S. against a resolution of this kind in 2011 was justified by the argument that peace cannot be imposed from without and by the hope of reviving the talks.<sup>560</sup> In a similar resolution in 2016, the U.S. opted to abstain on the ground that it cannot support any policy even by those of its allies, in reference to Israel, regardless “of our own interests, our own positions, our own words, [and] our own principles.” John Kerry noted that

---

<sup>556</sup>Shadi Hamid, “Was the Iran Deal Worth it,” *The Atlantic*,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/07/iran-nuclear-deal-consequences-obama/398780/>

<sup>557</sup> “John Kerry: Al Assad Presented Obama a Secret Peace Proposal with Israel in 2010,” *Middle East Monitor*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180905-john-kerry-al-assad-presented-to-obama-a-secret-peace-proposal-with-israel-in-2010/>

<sup>558</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), P 11.

<sup>559</sup> Zakaria, *The Strategist*

<sup>560</sup> David Remnick, “The Obama Administration’s Final Warning on the Middle East Peace Process,” *The New Yorker*, December 28, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-obama-administrations-final-warning-on-the-middle-east-peace-process>

the talks failed not because of a “low level of trust” but because each side resisted making concessions out of the fear that it would be politically costly.<sup>561</sup> The former U.S. ambassador to Israel under Bush Daniel Kurtzer concluded that the two-state solution is deadlocked and that nobody in the U.S., Israel or Palestine is committed to make it happen.<sup>562</sup> That Obama was the beacon of hope for a two-state solution is Ironic, argues Khaled Elgindy, given the insufficient efforts he devoted to arrive to such objective. Compared to other presidents in the last four decades, Obama scored the lowest in making breakthroughs in the process.<sup>563</sup>

In the realm of promoting democracy in the Middle East, Obama clearly distanced himself from his predecessor’s “Freedom Agenda” which sought to remake the region in the America image by trying to turn Iraq into a democracy through the use of force. Instead, Obama acknowledged the controversy surrounding this agenda, admitted that “no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by another” and that the previous attempts to do this had “stretched our military to the breaking point and distracted us from the growing threats of a dangerous world.”<sup>564</sup> His promise to deal with the region on a “mutual interest and mutual respect” basis clearly put the promotion of America’s national interests in the region at the forefront. Obama’s view of the previous Egyptian president as a non-authoritarian leader who was instrumental in sustaining peace with Israel, which he thought a hard task to do in the region, reveals that maintaining the status quo would be the norm in Obama ‘s Middle East policy.<sup>565</sup>

In real terms, American aid directed to democracy promotion in the region was estimated to have been cut by half during the Obama presidency. When popular protests broke out in the region in early 2011, the Obama administration adopted a “security-focused” approach on a crisis-management basis to deal with them and failed to adopt an ambitious strategy worthy of the protests’ scale and ambitions. As the military took hold of power in Egypt and violence escalated in the Syrian conflict, the possibility for reform became far harder and costlier to achieve.<sup>566</sup>

---

<sup>561</sup>Sarah Begley, “Read John Kerry’s Full Speech on Israeli Settlement and a Two-State Solution,” *Time*, December 28, 2016, <http://time.com/4619064/john-kerrys-speech-israel-transcript/>

<sup>562</sup>Remnick, *Obama Administration’s Final Warning*

<sup>563</sup> Khaled Elgindy, “Obama’s Record on Israeli-Palestinian Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2016-10-05/obamas-record-israeli-palestinian-peace>

<sup>564</sup> President Obama quoted in Fawaz Gerges *Obama and the Middle East*, 8.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>566</sup>Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, “The U.S. is Giving up on Middle East Democracy—and That’s a Mistake,” *The Atlantic*, January 7 , 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/the-us-is-giving-up-on-middle-east-democracy-and-thats-a-mistake/282890/>

Like with any policy objective, Obama's approach to democracy promotion was calculated on a costs-and-benefits basis taking into account local realities, the policy instruments available and American reputation among its regional allies. Previous experiences demonstrate that putting a democratic government in place is not as easy as regime change.<sup>567</sup> Moreover, the United States had to choose between democracy promotion and the cooperation of non-democratic regimes to achieve other policy objectives like counterterrorism, nonproliferation and the reception of much needed funds to finance the deficit. From a historical perspective, the United States needed non-democratic regimes more than they needed the United States, especially in terms of energy resources and the preservation of the old regional order. Put simply, "the alternative to a less than democratic but friendly government can be a less than democratic but hostile government."<sup>568</sup>

Relegating some policy objectives in the Middle East was formulated in light not only of domestic priorities, but also in the context of rebalancing the country's focus to more strategic regions. While the Obama administration pulled troops from Iraq, resisted deeper involvement in Syria, adopted a burden-sharing approach in dealing with the region's problems, it pursued an ambitious strategy in the Asia Pacific region through shoring up old alliances, building new partnerships and concluding security and trade agreements. With its economic, diplomatic and military facets, the "pivot," or what was later termed "rebalancing" was pursued not only to rebalance against a rising China, but also to tap into the region's wealth for America's economic revival.

### **1-3-3 Rebalancing to Asia: A Response to Structural Change**

In response to the same structural change induced by limited resources and the rise of regional powers, the Obama administration pursued a "rebalancing" strategy towards the Asia Pacific region for a number of reasons. This strategy was mainly informed by the judgment that the focus of American foreign policy in the last few decades was imbalanced, dominated largely by Europe and the Middle East with little attention to the Asia Pacific. With the latter experiencing unprecedented levels of economic growth, its potential as a source of recovery for an ailing economy made rebalancing far more compelling. No state better incarnates this structural change than China, whose double digit growth rate prompted a corresponding military modernization and an ambitious foreign policy that signaled a

---

<sup>567</sup>Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home*, 90

<sup>568</sup>*Ibid.*

change in the security architecture of the region. Thus, ‘rebalancing’ was not only a response to structural change that meant to reverse the decline in American power, but also to rebalance against the rising power of China. This shift in the distribution of power away from the United States to multiple centers of influence is best summarized in the Quadrennial Defense Review of 2010:

The distribution of global political, economic, and military power is becoming more diffuse. The rise of China, the world’s most populous country, and India, the world’s largest democracy, will continue to shape an international system that is no longer easily defined—one in which the United States will remain the most powerful actor but must increasingly work with key allies and partners if it is to sustain stability and peace.<sup>569</sup>

A pronounced dimension of the ‘rebalancing’ strategy was its emphasis on the Asia Pacific at the expense of the Middle East. In his statement before the Australian Parliament, Obama set a link between his country’s past preoccupation with the wars in the Middle East, the drawdown of forces from these wars, and the shift of “attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region.”<sup>570</sup> In an article in *Foreign Policy*, Hillary Clinton concluded that the country devoted enormous resources in the last ten years to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In a time of “scarce resources,” this should change to a strategy to invest time and energy “wisely where they will yield the biggest return” to sustain American leadership, secure its interests and promote its values, and the Asia Pacific region would figure prominently in this new calculus.<sup>571</sup>

National Security Adviser Tom Donilon noted that the strategy was formulated out of the calculation that the United States was “over-weighted” in some areas and regions, especially with the military commitments in the Middle East, and “underweighted” in places like the Asia Pacific. To rebalance American foreign policy, the administration needed to achieve a match between resources and foreign policy priorities, and shifting the focus to the Asia Pacific “in terms of resources; diplomatic activity and engagement both with nations and regional institutions”. Thus, by withdrawing from the Middle East, President Obama “dramatically improved America’s strategic freedom of maneuver so that our posture aligns

---

<sup>569</sup> “Quadrennial Defense Review Report,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, February 2010, <https://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf>

<sup>570</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” *The White House*, November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

<sup>571</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>



with our interests in a changing world and a dynamic region.”<sup>572</sup> Donilon admitted that prioritizing Asia was the result of a “diminution” in American “authority, prestige and power” which called for a “restoration attempt” of leadership by the president through “rebalancing our efforts in the world.”<sup>573</sup>

In his much-cited article on the Obama doctrine, Geoffrey Gulberg observed that given Obama’s personal connection with Asia and his belief that the future of the United States would be shaped by its developments, he came to office not preoccupied by the Middle East, a position that was further consolidated by America’s growing energy independence. Therefore, the ‘pivot’ and what later was termed ‘rebalancing’ to Asia became his “paramount priority.” The president’s discussions at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit 2015 in Manila were dominated by the developments in Asia, despite what was taking place in the Middle East, namely the war in Syria and the rise of armed groups like ISIS.<sup>574</sup>

Official visits of the president and his team are revealing of any administration’s strategic focus. As Obama’s National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes put it, “presidential travel sends a huge message” and “a trip can be somewhat transformative.”<sup>575</sup> While the number of Obama’s official visits abroad is comparable to his two predecessors, he made more stops in Asia and visited few countries in Europe and the Middle East than President Bush and Clinton. He was the first American president to pay official visits to Cambodia and Laos and the first since Lyndon Jonson to visit Malaysia. Ben Rhodes recalled that the president’s commitment to annually attend the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was not an easy decision, but was reached after a lengthy White House debate given the pressure imposed by Europe and the Middle East. Obama visited nine out of the ten members of the forum through thirteen stops compared to five members and eight stops by Bush and four members and five stops by Clinton.<sup>576</sup>

Amid the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Syria in 2014, the Pentagon asserted its commitment to the rebalancing strategy. Following state visits of the Defense Secretary to Asia, Defense

---

<sup>573</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “Interview with National Security Adviser Tom Donilon,” *GPS CNN*, July 3, 2011, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/07/03/interview\\_with\\_national\\_security\\_advisor\\_tom\\_donilon\\_110466.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/07/03/interview_with_national_security_advisor_tom_donilon_110466.html)

<sup>574</sup> Gulberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>575</sup> David Nakamura, “Obama has Spent almost Seven Months of his Presidency on Foreign Travel: He Put his Frequent Filer-Miles where his Mouth was: Asia,” *The Washington Post*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/international-travel-map.html>

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*

Department Press Secretary John Kirby noted that “given the fact that there is a lot going on in the world that we are still making these visits and still having these discussions speaks volumes about how important we believe the Asia Pacific theatre is.” Kirby also concluded that given the financial constraints imposed on defense and the commitment to the Asia Pacific, it would be harder to meet other commitments in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>577</sup>

From a realist perspective, rebalancing is seen largely as a response to a structural change manifest in the decline in American power, the rise of China and the rejection of the premise, which has long governed American foreign policy, that the United States is the only guarantor of international norms and security.<sup>578</sup> With diminished power and resources, rebalancing was meant to help revive the American economy by engaging with regional rising powers including China. In the security realm, the strategy aimed to rebalance against China’s growing regional ambitions by engaging regional allies and potential partners to share in the burden of regional security. Thus, the strategy reflects “a deeper geopolitical purpose” not only to induce a shift in the geographic focus of American foreign policy, but also to revive a weakened American leadership.<sup>579</sup>

In relation to the region’s vitality to the American economy, Secretary Clinton noted that America’s “economic recovery at home will depend on exports and the ability of American firms to tap into the vast and growing consumer base of Asia.”<sup>580</sup> The National Security Strategy of 2010 stressed that “Asia’s dramatic economic growth has increased its connection to America’s future prosperity,” and that the United States has “taken substantial steps” to deepen its engagement with the region through organizations, dialogue and diplomacy to strengthen existing ties and “to advance balanced and sustainable growth and to doubling U.S. exports.”<sup>581</sup> The National Security Strategy of 2015 noted that the United States remains a Pacific power and that in the next few years, 50 percent of America’s economic growth is estimated to be generated from Asia.<sup>582</sup>

---

<sup>577</sup> John Kirby, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, August 14, 2014, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606912/>

<sup>578</sup>Nicholas Kitchen, “Structural Shifts and Strategic Change: From the War on Terror to the Pivot to Asia,” in *Obama’s Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror*, ed. Michelle Bentley and Jack Holland. (USA:Routledge, 2014), P 71

<sup>579</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>580</sup> Clinton, *America’s Pacific Century*.

<sup>581</sup>*National Security Strategy 2010*, 43.

<sup>582</sup>*National Security Strategy 2015*, 24.

The Obama administration embarked on a number of economic initiatives to make ‘rebalancing’ possible. The Transpacific Partnership (TPP) promised to involve countries that account for 800 million inhabitants, 40 % of global GDP and which received 45% of the U.S. exports in 2014. While American officials assert otherwise, the agreement was seen as a response to America’s steady decline and as a counterbalancing act against a rising China.<sup>583</sup> Along with the TPP, the Obama administration deepened its engagement with ASEAN and concluded a free trade agreement with South Korea.<sup>584</sup>

At the military level, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta noted that despite the fiscal constraints, the United States would maintain a global presence but “will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia Pacific region.” The National Military Strategy put forward “a five-year budget plan and a detailed blueprint” to achieve security objectives while meeting the department’s fiscal responsibilities. The Pentagon aimed to renovate its naval capacity by introducing more advanced battleships, increase the number and size of training activities, and augment port visits to the region. More importantly, America’s naval presence would shift from 50/50 percent between the Pacific and the Atlantic to 60/40 percent by 2020. This presence would involve 6 aircraft carriers out of 11, and most of the cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat Ships and submarines.<sup>585</sup>

While the Asia Pacific received more diplomatic, economic and military attention and resources, the Middle East, despite consequential security developments like the rise of ISIS, continued to be dealt with on a crisis-management basis with the exception of the nuclear deal with Iran. The complete withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the decline in the diplomatic presence and aid to the country, the resistance to deeper involvement in the Syrian conflict and the reliance on local forces rather than U.S. troops in the war against ISIS are revealing of the region’s place in the administration’s calculus. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans Janine Davidson concluded that while American forces pulled out from the Middle East, Asia would not see any troop reductions and would rather witness an increase in military presence made possible by withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan. Deploying more forces to the region signals a departure from the previous administration’s military strategy

---

<sup>583</sup> George Loffmann, “The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint: President Obama’s Conflicted Grand Strategy in Asia,” *Asian Security*, 30 June 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2016.1190338>

<sup>584</sup> Nickolas Kitchen, “Hegemonic Transition Theory and U.S. Foreign Policy,” in *Obama and the World*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge (USA: Routledge, 2014), 89-90

<sup>585</sup> Leon E. Panetta, “Remarks by Secretary Panetta at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, June 2, 2012, <https://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5049>

that was informed by a “strategic environment of the Cold War” and based on deploying troops from home in times of crises.<sup>586</sup>

This Asia-focus policy was informed by the region’s changing dynamics and their impact on American interests and security. Henry Kissinger contends that the growing wealth of emerging states in the region has been accompanied by military modernization and ambitious foreign policies that are based not on the traditional balance of power system, but on varying visions of national interests and prestige nurtured mainly by a postcolonial national identity. This might well trigger miscalculations and arms race, add to the volatility of the region, and above all threaten the international order sustained by the West.<sup>587</sup>

With its distinct worldview, China incarnates the biggest challenge to American presence and policy in the region. The world order as perceived by Chinese elites is not one composed by competing nation states, but with one where China is on top of a hierarchy system with all the other nations connected to it through a “tributary relationship” depending on their proximity to the Chinese culture.<sup>588</sup> In dealing with the United States, Chinese policy makers follow a 19<sup>th</sup> century model of “great power relations” based on mutual recognition of spheres of influence, the accommodation of respective national interests, and the subordination of customary international law to national interests. With such worldview go a strong sense of nationalism and a soaring military budget that was projected to match that of the U.S. by 2030, the combination of which challenges U.S. ability to project power and influence in the region.<sup>589</sup>

Rather than leaving a rising China to dictate the terms of the regional security architecture and to draw new disciples, the United States aimed to make sure all states, including China, still adhere to the liberal international order, assure its regional allies of its security commitments and build new partnerships with emerging states. At a time fiscal austerity, engaging these states to share in the burden of regional security became also a key component of the rebalancing strategy. Obama’s China policy was also inclined by the notion that growing wealth should be accompanied by taking on more responsibilities and therefore global challenges like economic recovery, nuclear proliferation, and climate change should

---

<sup>586</sup> Janine Davidson, “The U.S. ‘Pivot to Asia’,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21, Special Issue (June 2014): 79-80

<sup>587</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (U.S: Penguin Press, 2014), 212-213

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, 213-214

<sup>589</sup> Hans Binnendijk, *Friends, Foes, and Future Directions*, (USA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 18-19, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1210.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1210.html)

not be shouldered by the U.S alone, but China should also pull its weight. If anything, this signifies an admission on the part of American officials of the redistribution of power and resources away from the United States towards the Asia Pacific region with China occupying the center stage.<sup>590</sup>

While the imbalance between available resources and America's international commitments, especially in the Middle East, was not the only factor that influenced Obama's policy choices when considered separately, it nonetheless shaped the general guidelines of his strategy through resetting priorities and national interests. Despite its influence as a systemic variable on Obama foreign policy, America's place in the international system should not be viewed in isolation but in relation to the international environment, and more importantly the regional environment of the Middle East and the extent to which it permitted or constrained what the United States could do to project influence and protect its interests.

#### **4- The Regional Environment and the Direction of Obama's ME Policy**

In formulating his Middle East policy, Obama had to contend not only with restoring a leading role of his country in the international system but also with the changes taking place in the system itself. In the popular uprisings that swept the region in recent years, the assertive policies of America's rivals and the rise of non-state actors limited what the United States can do to influence events. Russia and China in particular have been active resisting America's involvement in Syria through the U.N. Security Council and by resorting to the norms of non-interference in the affairs of other states and the respect of their sovereignty. Meanwhile, Russian and Iran used the same norms of intervention long employed by the West to step up their military presence in the name of fighting terrorism and preserving security. The rise of non-state armed groups further complicated America's choices as the strongest among these actors were either siding with Assad and his allies or had agendas incompatible with American preferences. This context made every available option at the U.S. disposal unlikely to achieve American objectives and likely to exacerbate its already weakened position in the region.

---

<sup>590</sup>Mlada Bukovansky, Ian Clark, Robyn Eckersley, Richard Price, Christian Reus-Smit and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power* (New York:Cambridge University Press, 2012)

## 2-1 An International Environment Fraught with Complexities

The present international environment as perceived by American policy makers is both unclear and very complex because of its changing nature and inconstancy. The U.S. National Security Strategy of 2010 highlighted the “very fluidity in the international system that breeds new challenges.”<sup>591</sup> The world that the U.S. faced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century is different from the present one both in terms of the players involved and the forces that drive them. The nation-state system and the international institutions devised in the last century are being challenged by revisionist and rising powers, and by individuals and non-state actors who “can have dramatic influence on the world around them.”<sup>592</sup> While ideology underpinned the conflicts of the twentieth century, religious, sectarian, and identity tensions have fueled hostilities at the regional level.<sup>593</sup>

A key variable that is also driving the change in the international system is the shift in the nature of power used by actors to achieve what they want. While during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries industrialization was the main driver of power shift, today’s globalized world is characterized by more subtle means available at states’ disposal to influence their environment.<sup>594</sup> China’s reserve currency for example can be a more powerful leverage against the United States than its military power. What is described as “regional multilateralism” has made it harder for hegemonic powers to exert influence at the regional level. The advance of technology has also made the conventional means of conducting wars less effective, especially when possessed by non-state actors that defy the international norms that states usually adhere to.<sup>595</sup>

Pentagon policy planners also recognize that change in the present “complex and uncertain security landscape” is driven by globalization and technological advancement which have given a wide range of actors, especially non-state ones, access to cutting-edge technologies that were once the “purview” of strong states.<sup>596</sup> Such changes have empowered smaller states to compete with great powers through benefiting from a more interconnected world made possible by technology and the spread of information. This latter is also challenging

---

<sup>591</sup>*National Security Strategy 2010*, 9.

<sup>592</sup>*Ibid*, 7.

<sup>593</sup>*Ibid*, 1.

<sup>594</sup> Nicholas Kitchen, “Hegemonic Transition Theory and U.S. Foreign Policy,” in *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge (New York, Routledge: 2014), p 85

<sup>595</sup>*Ibid*, p 86

<sup>596</sup>*Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2010*, 9

states' ability to control events and people within their borders and to maintain the status quo.<sup>597</sup>

Such change has also altered the nature of warfare as U.S. adversaries increase the use of unconventional technologies to counterbalance U.S. conventional military preponderance. Military conflicts have become “hybrid” where a range of actors are involved and more indirect means are employed ranging from proxy forces, surrogates like armed groups, and the manipulation of the flow of information.<sup>598</sup> Even when defeating adversaries in such complex environment is possible, post-conflict operations remain a daunting and challenging task. The Quadrennial Defense Review Report of 2010 concludes that “there are few cases in which U.S. Armed Forces would engage in sustained large scale combat operations without the associated need to assist in the transition to just and stable government” which is a “complex and taxing mission.”<sup>599</sup> In this “complex world,” the National Security Strategy of 2015 admitted that despite America’s relative strength, it would have to make difficult choices among many priorities because “many of the security problems we face do not lend themselves to quick and easy fixes.”<sup>600</sup>

This complex environment has transformed the world not to a “multipolar” one dominated by great powers and states as many scholars contend, but to what Amitav Acharya describes a “multiplex world” in which a wide range of actors ranging from regional powers, regional institutions, non-state armed groups, social movements and even individual who are challenging what world powers can do.<sup>601</sup> This “multiplexity” has made the emerging challenges equally complex. While traditional interstate conflicts have been receding, conflicts within states and across borders have been on the rise. Dangers emanating from non-state armed groups pose greater risk to nations than from those caused by states. In this context, world powers like the United States would find it increasingly difficult to impose the rules that have long dominated the international order and would have to contend with, and accommodate, other actors whose objectives are not always in line with its preferences.<sup>602</sup>

While individuals and non-state actors are challenging the nation-state system and its apparatus, regional orders, and disorders, are also challenging the international order created

---

<sup>597</sup>*Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2014*, 3

<sup>598</sup>*Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2010*, 8

<sup>599</sup>*Ibid*, 20

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>601</sup> Amitav Acharya, *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*, (UK:Cambridge University Press, 2018),276-277

<sup>602</sup>*Ibid*.

by the West. The Strategic Defense Guideline of 2012 concluded that South Asia and the Middle East represent the “primary loci” where threats from no-state actors emanate.<sup>603</sup> In the Middle East, the “Arab Awakening” also presents both challenges and opportunities, but more importantly “uncertainties.”<sup>604</sup> The National Security Strategy of 2015 described the conflicts within states in the Middle East after the invasion of Iraq and the public uprisings of 2011 as a “generational struggle” which “will redefine the region as well as relationships among communities and between citizens and their governments.”<sup>605</sup> What the two regions have in common in relation to American foreign policy is the challenge they pose to what is known as the international liberal order of which U.S. policy makers think as the backbone of American hegemony and preponderance.

In this context, Acharya distinguishes between the *international order* constructed by a hegemon, superpowers and the institutions they create and the *global order* which is created by the normative contributions of all communities.<sup>606</sup> While Acharya argues that the present order is in reality global and not international,<sup>607</sup> the influence of the West and their international institutions and norms is still marked to make it so. However, this order is being increasingly made global by what happens within regions, and mainly through the resistance of regional players, whether states or no-state actors, to many of the norms and institutions created and sustained by the West. This is very evident in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East in the last decade. At the level of states, regional powers like China, Russia and Iran are making it more difficult for the U.S. and its allies to change regimes or influence events through direct or indirect military interventions, an approach that guided U.S. foreign policy in the two decades after the Cold War. The rise of non-state groups in Iraq and Syria has posed a challenge to the nation-state system and to the old regional order. Though very limited in their impact, such actors at least brought to the fore the question of the viability and the legitimacy of such order in the eyes of people in the region.

While it might be argued that American power is still preponderant to be challenged by smaller states and disorganized non-state actors, the role of agency, or the power to influence and change, should not be viewed only in its material sense. Despite their weakness in material power compared to hegemonic or superpower states, actors at the periphery can act

---

<sup>603</sup> *Strategic Defense Guideline 2012*, 1

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*



as normative and ideational agents to challenge or transform the exiting order and the status quo.<sup>608</sup> Moreover, agency should not be construed only as a way to shore up the status quo, but also to resist or reject it and even to create new norms and institutions at the local and regional level to counterbalance hegemonic and superpower dominance. If seen through this lens, “agency is not the prerogative of the strong. It can manifest as the weapon of the weak.”<sup>609</sup>

Moreover, if the power of the normative and the ideational agency of such regional states and non-state actors is considered in aggregate, the resistance to U.S.-led order would be far more critical. While it is hard to see all the players vying for power and influence with the U.S. pursuing the same agenda and ideology, the overarching drive to resisting a U.S. foreign policy increasingly seen as self-interested, interventionist and fed by the idea of exceptionalism have gained more momentum after the Iraq invasion. In the same vein, U.S. Middle East policy is challenged not only by restive and rejectionist adversaries, but also by regional allies and pro-Western non-state actors whose agenda is not always in line with U.S. interests and preferences.

## **2-2 The Middle East and the Challenge of “Multiplexity”**

It was in such regional complexities that Obama pursued a retrenchment foreign policy in the region that aimed not only to promote American interests, but also to accommodate those of others. Such policy was less reactive than adaptive to the changes taking place in the region for which U.S. previous policies are partly responsible. Instead of using the same policy instruments that have triggered resistance among adversaries and made directing unfolding events more expensive, the Obama administration eschewed ground military interventions and increased its reliance on regional allies, non-state armed groups and technology to achieve its policy objectives. What is critical in this context is not only how America’s declining power has limited what the U.S. could do in the region, but how others’ perceptions of this power and America’s role have intensified their resistance and rejection of any ambitious American Middle East policy.

While the relatively stable environment in the Middle East during Obama’s first term in office made troop withdrawal more justifiable, the developments that followed the popular

---

<sup>608</sup> Ibid,13

<sup>609</sup> Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 2014): 651-652

uprisings in 2011 made any U.S. intervention costlier, especially with the high prospects of post-intervention commitments to maintain stability and order. Such stance was not a mere consequence of U.S. experience in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, but also of the deeper involvement of a variety of actors with differing and sometimes conflicting agendas.

Official Washington was therefore acting on the principle that profound changes taking place in the Middle East are beyond the United States to control or direct. In response to the assumption that the United States is in retreat from the international stage and is reluctant to take a leading role to influence events, President Obama explained that in a changing world the United States is “not going to be able to control every transition and transformation. Sometimes they are going to go sideways.”<sup>610</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also noted that “we live not only in a dangerous, but incredibly complicated world right now with many different forces at work, both state-based and non-state, technology and communications” where “it’s not always easy to perceive what must be done.”<sup>611</sup> In this context, Russia, Iran and to a lesser extent China were the primary source of resistance to any other U.S. intervention in the region, and the case of Syria is a pertinent case in point.

While directing and influencing the unfolding events was desirable, the Obama administration was hampered by the growing involvement of Russia, China and Iran in the region and the rise of non-state armed groups whose objectives were at loggerhead with those of the U.S. Russia and China have been actively resisting Western interference and military intervention in Syria by promoting the norms of non-interference and the respect of state sovereignty. Russia and Iran have been using the same norms to prop up their ally in Damascus through military and financial assistance at the expense of the poorly-coordinated pro-American opposition. With the rise of hundreds of armed groups with varying objectives and intentions, the two powers found an added reason to expand their presence in the name of fighting terrorism and preserving peace and stability. While the strongest among these groups were either fighting alongside the Assad regime or pursuing their independent agenda, others with visions compatible with Western norms were weak, disorganized and divided along political lines. When the nascent group known as ISIS seemed to threaten the regional order that the United States has been sustaining, Washington turned to a burden-sharing and ‘light footprint’ approach to maintain the status quo.

---

<sup>610</sup>*Interview Obama Clinton with Steve Kroft of CBS's '60 Minutes*

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid*

## **2-2-1 Regional Powers' Balancing Acts in the Middle East: The Case of Syria**

In the Syrian conflict in particular, the United States was hobbled by the active resistance of Russia and Iran, and to some extent China, whose stakes and interests were far higher and entrenched than those of the United States. Moreover, these players were challenging the United States not merely with the military assistance and later on the promises of economic investments, but by challenging the very principles of intervention, the responsibility to protect and American exceptionalism on the basis that such norms were tested and led to dire consequences in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Meanwhile, Putin and Iranian leaders were using the same pretext of fighting terrorism that the West has employed to justify foreign interventions to legitimize their military presence in Syria, thus making what were America's normative assets the liabilities that worsened its self-inflicted wounds.

### **2-2-1-1 The Sino-Russian Holdout against American Interventionism**

The Syrian conflict has become a center stage where emerging powers like Russia and China are challenging American influence and are voicing their discontent with a world order dominated by Western powers and with norms that have governed their foreign policies. At a time when interstate war becomes unthinkable, the UN Security Council became the space where these powers work to defy American foreign policy, with the veto power as their potent instrument to do so. Russia has used its veto power twelve times and China six times to block resolutions proposed by the West in relation to the conflict.<sup>612</sup> The aims of these resolutions range from condemning the Syrian government for the use of force, investigating the use of chemical weapons, imposing sanctions on their alleged use by the Syrian army, or imposing ways to direct the conflict.<sup>613</sup>

The Chinese and Russian interests in Syria have been driving the two countries' resistance to Western interference in the conflict, let alone outright military intervention. No foreign country holds such multifaceted and entrenched interests in Syria like Russia. The strategic alliance between the two countries which dates back to the Cold War is manifest in the cultural and educational exchanges and is cherished in popular and official discourse. When the Syrian protests broke out in early 2011, 100,000 Russian citizens were residing in Syria. Economically, Russia is the first arms exporter to Syria and accounts for 78% of such exports

---

<sup>612</sup> "Russia's 12 UN Vetoes on Syria," *RTE*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2018/0411/953637-russia-syria-un-veto/>

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*

from 2007 and 2012. Between 2009 and 2013 Russia made 20\$ billion of direct investments. Syria is also a strategic asset for Russia as it hosts the only Russian military base outside the former Soviet Union. Access to Syria means also an access to the whole region as the country borders Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and more importantly the Mediterranean.<sup>614</sup>

For China, the Syrian conflict coincides with its ambitious foreign policy to harness its economic leverage to expand its influence globally, usually with the intention to counterbalance American influence. In this regard, Syria figured prominently in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which also aimed to integrate Iraq and Iran in the region. The Assad government's promise to give China, along with Russia and Iran, the privilege in future economic investments and reconstruction projects is an added incentive to China's economic policy. What makes China more attractive for economic partnership is the distance it keeps from domestic politics and governance. Moreover, further cooperation with Syria means more cooperation with its allies, namely Russia and Iran, especially in matters of security and military training.<sup>615</sup>

While Sino-Russian interests in Syria can explain their policies towards the conflict, such explanation remains very limited. Russian arms sales to Syria are not as critical as to other countries like China, India and Algeria. Even economically, Syria is not a very promising market for Russian and Chinese goods, especially if the post-conflict reconstruction projects would limit what Syria could spend on arms or consumer goods. Financially, Assad seems more a liability than an asset for the two powers. Therefore, the opposition to Western interference in Syria stems in large part from the two countries resolve to limit Western norms of humanitarian intervention, unilateralism, and by extension their exercise of influence.<sup>616</sup> Most importantly, as Libya set the example for China and Russia on how a limited UN mandate to protect civilians was turned into a carte blanche for regime change, the two powers meant Syria to be an example for the West on how limited their influence has become in managing international affairs.

Upholding the norms of non-interference in the internal affairs of states and military interventions in conflicts is a way to oppose American influence and the norms of

---

<sup>614</sup>Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Many Interests in Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 24, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-many-interests-in-syria>

<sup>615</sup>Dan Hemenway, "Chinese Strategic Engagement with Assad's Syria," *Atlantic Council*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/chinese-strategic-engagement-with-assad-s-syria>

<sup>616</sup>Rajan Menon, "Beijing and Moscow Balk at 'interference'," *Current History*, 1 November 2012, <https://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/article-abstract/111/748/310/108890>

interventionism and unilateralism that have governed its foreign policy in the post-Cold War World. For Russia and China, the only way to deal with the Syrian conflict is through the United Nations, international law, and the norms that govern international affairs. In the case of the use of chemical weapons in 2013, the two countries asserted that any decisions taken by the UNSC, including the use of military force, should be based on evidence from independent investigation by the U.N.<sup>617</sup>

To promote the norms of non-interference and non-intervention, Russia has not only resorted to the argument of upholding international law and multilateral institutions, but also sought the cooperation of other likeminded non-Western states like China, Brazil and India. Starting from the premise that Western powers have lost credibility to impose moral codes of order due to their past policies, the management of international affairs cannot be based on Western norms only, but should reflect a multipolar world where non-Western states should have a voice on a par with the U.S. and its allies.<sup>618</sup> But such practice does not mean that Russia longs for a more democratized international politics, but rather to make sure that great powers are in charge of managing international affairs by merit of their power and status.<sup>619</sup>

Apart from using international institutions and multilateral cooperation as a means to counterbalance American foreign policy, China and Russia have also advanced the norm of state sovereignty to advance their anti-American cause. To this end, they promote what is termed the “narrow conception of sovereignty” which is advanced by the United Nations and stipulates that states cannot, individually or in unison, “intervene or interfere in any form or for any reason in the internal and external affairs of States.”<sup>620</sup> Even a limited political change like the departure of Assad is for Putin “absolutely inappropriate, harmful and against international law” because “it is only up to the Syrian people living in Syria to determine who, how and based on what principles should [the Syrians] rule their country.”<sup>621</sup> Supporters of “humanitarian intervention” also argue that it is the same source of international law and conduct, the United Nations, that allow for the use of sanctions and even military force to preserve peace when endangered by the application of violence within individual states.

---

<sup>617</sup>“Interview to Channel one and Associated Press News Agency,” *Kremlin*, September 4, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143> and “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on September 2, 2013,” *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Seychelles*, September 2, 2013, <http://sc.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1072085.htm>

<sup>618</sup>Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London: Chatham House, 2015), 97.

<sup>619</sup>Ibid.

<sup>620</sup>Menon, *Beijing and Moscow*, 310.

<sup>621</sup>Vladimir Putin, “Interview to American TV channel CBS and PBS,” *Kremlin*, September 29, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/50380>

Sovereignty, in their view, is sacred only when it serves its purpose, which is the protection of human and individual rights. When it does not, it becomes obsolete and it rests then on the outside world to protect such rights.<sup>622</sup>

Even if this argument would hold against the Sino-Russian conception of sovereignty, Western powers as practitioners of ‘humanitarian intervention’ are discredited by their past practices of intervention and the ramifications that ensued. Putin contends that his opposition to Western intervention and regime change in Syria stems from a conviction “based on the events of the last decade, in particular the attempts to bring democracy to Iraq or Lebanon” which ended with “the collapse of statehood and the rise in terrorism.”<sup>623</sup> He also presents his Syria policy as aimed not to prop up an ally, but to prevent the repetition of the Iraqi and the Libyan scenarios, and more importantly to strengthen the legitimate governments of the countries in the region.<sup>624</sup> Even without an outright Western intervention in Iraq and Syria on the scale of past experiences, Putin blames instability in the region on the “heavy-handed and irresponsible interference from the outside into the affairs of the region and unilateral use of force, ‘double standers’, and differentiating between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ terrorists.”<sup>625</sup>

That the United States should act to stop atrocities or punish its perpetrators because of its “exceptionalism” is also widely contested and even rebuffed by America’s rivals. After backing down from a military attack against the Assad regime after its alleged use of chemical weapons, Obama noted that it was because of “the credible threat of U.S. military action” that Assad and his allies offered a diplomatic alternative and that America’s standing for the protection of lives from such weapons is what makes it “different” and “exceptional.”<sup>626</sup> In response to this stance, Putin wrote that “it is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional” and that “it is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States.”<sup>627</sup> He also drew parallels between the consequences of U.S. interventions in

---

<sup>622</sup>Rajan Menon, op. cit. , p 311.

<sup>623</sup>Vladimir Putin, “Interview to Bloomberg,” *Kremlin*, September 5, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/52830>

<sup>624</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Interview to German newspaper Bild. Part 2,” *Kremlin*, January 12, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/51155>

<sup>625</sup>Vladimir Putin, “Interview to the Al-Ahram Daily,” *Kremlin*, February 9, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/47643>

<sup>626</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President in an Address to the Nation on Syria,” *The White House*, September 10, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>

<sup>627</sup>Putin, *A Plea for Caution*

Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and what would another intervention in Syria engender, questioning why the current administration is bent on repeating the same mistake.<sup>628</sup>

Jeffery Sachs contends that one element of American exceptionalism is “relentless war” that is evident in 280 military interventions and nuclear stalemates along with 29 wars with the aboriginal people of the country throughout American history.<sup>629</sup> Such pattern makes war the “norm of American national life.”<sup>630</sup> The notion of American exceptionalism is now outdated and “misguided” because of the economic rise of China and other emerging states which put limits on the power of the U.S. military, making it unable to “decisively determine the direction of geopolitics, or even local politics in places where it intervenes.”<sup>631</sup> Working for a multipolar world to tackle global problems should be the new foreign policy of the United States, which is a “tall order that requires a fundamental and realistic rethinking of our world and America’s place in it.”<sup>632</sup>

The Sino-Russian stance is but one element of a larger foreign policy framework to promote a balance in the decision making power in international relations similar to the ongoing shift in material power. The two countries want also to abort any precedent of regime change triggered by popular protests and aided by outsiders, a precedent that could later be duplicated in countries allied with China and Russia or within the two states themselves. Limiting what the United States could do in Syria and the wider region could also send the message that remaking the world in the American image is not an easy business, that others’ views of how the world should look like or function should also be taken into account, and that their views in international politics also matter. But the use of concepts of state sovereignty, legitimacy, and upholding international law did not end with resisting American influence diplomatically, but transcended to justify outright Russian military intervention, a move that further demonstrated Russia’s resolve when that of the United States abated.

### **2-2-1-2 Russo-Iranian Involvement: Complicating American Calculus**

Russia and Iran’s deeper involvement in Syria further complicated America’s choices and made any military intervention and even military support to the opposition, the least viable

---

<sup>628</sup> Ibid.

<sup>629</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, *A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p 2.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid

<sup>631</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

option. Obama believes that Russian and Iranian support emboldened President Assad and his resistance to engage in a political transition.<sup>633</sup> He also contends that his critics' advocacy for a U.S. military intervention is not based on an accurate grasp of the conflict because the weak and divided opposition is fighting "a professional army that is well-armed and sponsored by two large states who have huge stakes in [the conflict]."<sup>634</sup> The 'moderate' opposition whose views are in line with American preferences was not "going to be in a position anytime soon to be able to compete with an army, Hezbollah, Iran and Russia supporting the regime."<sup>635</sup>

Although the Russian and Iranian support to Assad differs in its timing, form and intensity, it was complimentary and effective to achieve its main objective, which is to ensure the survival of the Assad regime. Even before Russia sent its military airplanes and deployed its special operation forces to Syria, Iran was active on the ground with its Quds force and its proxy armed groups like Hezbollah and Shia militias. Moreover, Iran provided the Assad government with financial support and administrative counseling at the most critical time when it was losing ground in 2013 and 2014.<sup>636</sup> In 2015, Russia intervened directly in the conflict when Iranian military resources were dispersed in Iraq and Yemen, providing the Syrian and Iranian forces the air cover they needed to tip the balance of power in their favor.<sup>637</sup>

In defense of their deeper involvement in Syria and the region, Russian and Iranian leaders used the same rationale they employed to defend the Assad regime diplomatically and which the West have used to justify their military interventions in the region, namely the pretexts of fighting terrorism and preserving stability. Putin believes that the Assad government is the only legitimate authority in Syria with its army as the sole organized power. While he decried the armed Syrian opposition as "illegal structures" and that American support to them "runs counter to the principles of modern international law and the United Nations Charter," he explained that Russian support is provided to "legitimate Syrian authorities" and that if it

---

<sup>633</sup> Barack Obama, "Interview with Charlie Rose on PBS 'Charlie Rose'" *The American Presidency Project*, June 17, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-pbs-charlie-rose>

<sup>634</sup> Barack Obama "Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of Bloomberg's 'views,'" *The American Presidency Project*, February 27, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-jeffrey-goldberg-bloombergs-view>

<sup>635</sup> Barack Obama, "Interview with Mika Brzezinski of MSNBC's 'Morning Joe,'" *The American Presidency Project*, June 23, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-mika-brzezinski-msnbc-morning-joe>

<sup>636</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Iranian Relations through the Prism of the Syrian Crisis," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 4 (fall 2017): 107-108

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid*, 113.



falters to do so, state institutions would be weakened, giving way to the same situation that other places in the region like Libya is experiencing.<sup>638</sup>

Hassan Rouhani of Iran claims that his country's "practical policy" is evident in its "struggle against strife and unrest," and that all Iran's activities in Syria are in line with international law and the Charter of the United Nations. Thus, the aim of Iran's support to Syria is to "restore peace and safety, to fight and eliminate terrorists and to prevent a repeat of the pattern of destabilization of Muslim countries." While he vindicates his country's altruistic motives in Syria, Rouhani denounced the efforts of "some countries in our region" as emulating the American example by spreading hatred and creating divisions to "tear the region apart." Following the dictates of state sovereignty, the presence of foreign troops in the Syrian territories absent the official consent of the Syrian government can never be justified.<sup>639</sup>

The two countries' foreign policies in the region are formulated in large part as a reaction to America's past policies and based on the perception that the Obama administration lacks the will and the resources to embark on another military confrontation. Russia's policy in particular is conducted at the backdrop of a widespread perception that the United States is retreating from the region and that its influence is in decline.<sup>640</sup> Angela Stent argues that the Russian leadership has seized on the U.S. "ambivalence about its future role in the region to re-assert Russia's influence there" and that Russia's deep involvement has achieved one of Putin's major objectives, to bring Russia back to "the global board of directors."<sup>641</sup> Melony also contends that commentators who underscore Iran's activities in the region as a source of destabilization dismiss the fact that America's decision to invade Iraq has been the principal source of instability, a decision that was part of a foreign policy that has been "erratic, unpredictable, and in many ways destructive." Driven by the perception that its regime is fighting a battle of survival, Iran strives to expand and exert influence whenever possible, and exporting the Islamic Revolution model as an antidote to Western imperialism is an integral part of such effort.<sup>642</sup>

---

<sup>638</sup> Putin, *Interview to American TV*

<sup>639</sup> "Meeting with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan," *Kremlin*, November 22, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56152>

<sup>640</sup> Bruce Jones, "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region," *Brookings*, 7 January 2019, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP\\_20190107\\_new\\_geopolitics\\_of\\_mena\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP_20190107_new_geopolitics_of_mena_final.pdf)

<sup>641</sup> Ibid

<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

The way Russian's growing involvement has constrained American foreign policy is that it added to the complexity of power relations in the region. It has contributed to the creation of a system of three layers; at the state level in the conflict between the local governments and the rebels, at the regional level with the intense vying for dominance between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel, and at the international level in the competition for influence between Washington and Moscow.<sup>643</sup> Such system is not only far more complex than that of the Cold War, but has worked for Russia's advantage more than the United States. Unlike the United States, Russia has nurtured ties with all states in the region irrespective of their ideology or political system.<sup>644</sup>

The Obama administration's resistance to a deeper involvement in the Syrian conflict was driven in large part by the concern that a military confrontation "would touch off a no-win escalatory dynamic" and American forces would be overwhelmed by a Syrian army assisted massively by Russia and Iran.<sup>645</sup> A possible standoff would in turn exacerbate the conflict, add to the humanitarian suffering and "expand the threat of terrorism." Obama's choices were also limited by the rise of ISIS, which made its fight and defeat a more urgent priority.<sup>646</sup> While Putin succeeded in employing all the political, economic and military leverage he had in Syria to expand Russian influence in the region and keep the United States out of the Syrian conflict, Obama's only leverage was his hope that Russia would be overwhelmed and be forced to retreat.<sup>647</sup>

Iran's entrenched interests in Syria and its massive military and economic assistance to shore up the Assad regime were strong incentives for Iran to resist any American involvement in the conflict. America's past failures in Iraq emboldened and further strengthened the so called "resistance front," comprising Iran, Hezbollah, and other Shia militias, to prevent further American involvement in the region.<sup>648</sup> Such front was bound to the Syrian regime with more than material and strategic interests, but with strong religious and sectarian ties. With the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Tehran at the forefront of Obama's foreign policy

---

<sup>643</sup> Ross Harrison, "Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective," *Aljazeera Center for Studies*, September 2, 2018, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>

<sup>644</sup> Jones, *New Geopolitics*

<sup>645</sup> Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: the Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>

<sup>646</sup> Ibid.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

<sup>648</sup> Harrison, *Shifts in the Middle East*

priorities, any military assault against Assad would be likely to escalate tensions with Iran and make the conclusion of a nuclear deal a far-fetched enterprise. The rise of ISIS and other armed groups hostile to all outside powers made a tacit cooperation, rather than confrontation, with Russia and Iran to fight these groups a necessity.

### **2-2-2 Non-state Actors and the Complexity of the Operational Environment**

The rise of non-state armed groups in the region following the popular uprisings added to the complexity of the regional environment and made direct U.S. military intervention to influence events a less viable option. Such conditions, however, informed a military intervention without the direct engagement of American troops on the ground and the reliance on local state and non-state forces to fight the group known as ISIS. Obama's reluctance to use force to bring a change in the Syrian conflict was influenced by the perception that too many non-state actors were involved, that pro-American groups are the weakest, and therefore a military intervention would not serve American objectives. When the rise of ISIS seemed to threaten direct American interests in the region, namely the traditional regional order created by the West, Obama resorted to a military campaign that did not involve American soldiers on the battleground but sought the employment of local forces to do the task.

Obama's approach to the changes taking place in the Middle East is revealing of a much broader pattern of change in the regional environment. Andreas Krieg and Jean-Mark Rickli contend that the resort of the Obama administration to what is termed the 'surrogate war' is due to a regional environment made complex by an array of non-state actors which not only contest state sovereignty and the existing regional order, but also operate for varying and opposing objectives.<sup>649</sup> Such environment can be described as 'post-Westphalian' and is "characterized by non-state violence, globalized conflicts, [and] a prioritization of risk management in a mediatized environment." In this context, traditional means of warfare are becoming more irrelevant and the state "has to explore ways to remain relevant as the primary communal security provider." In post-modern conflicts triggered by such change, deploying the state's armed forces becomes less desirable and is replaced by human and technological surrogates to ensure better management of risks and costs.<sup>650</sup>

---

<sup>649</sup> Andreas Krieg and Jean-Mark Rickli, "Surrogate Warfare: the Art of War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Defense Studies* 18, no. 2 (January 2018): 113.

<sup>650</sup>Ibid

While the Obama administration ruled out the option of direct military intervention to force Assad to step down, it also resisted calls to arm the opposition to achieve this objective. A primary challenge to such choice was the lack of political and ideological unity of the armed opposition. The National Intelligence Director James Clapper testified that, as of February 2014, the number of insurgents fighting Assad was estimated to be at least 80,000 and could even exceed 100,000 who were active across 1500 groups of “widely varying political leanings.”<sup>651</sup> These groups fight for differing, and sometimes opposing, objectives and political visions on how a post-Assad Syria would be governed. They also controlled different areas of the country and even engage in hostilities.<sup>652</sup> The Congressional Research Service concluded that “the underlying incompatibility of different groups’ motives and intentions is difficult to ignore,” especially with the existence of “extremist” groups engaged in fighting other “moderate” groups and who resist the establishment of a democratic form of government in Syria after Assad.<sup>653</sup>

The process of weeding out the ‘moderate’ groups that would work for a democratic system of government, or at least would not work against American interests, was the most challenging task before arming the opposition. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey noted that all the administration’s policy options in Syria, including arming the opposition, “hinge on a much clearer understanding of the environment.”<sup>654</sup> Dempsey advocated enthusiastically along with the State Department and the CIA to arm the opposition, but admitted the challenge of vetting the opposition forces that, in case they prevailed, would be committed to the establishment of a democratic and inclusive government and to prevent the demise of state institutions or a ‘failed state’ scenario.<sup>655</sup>

President Obama admitted that even after the White House was able to distinguish between the ‘moderate’ members of the opposition and those who were affiliated with El Nusra, El Qaida, and those who came from the battlefield of Afghanistan and Yemen, the conclusion was that “some of the most effective fighters within the opposition have been those who

---

<sup>651</sup> James Clapper, “Remarks as Delivered by James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence,” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, February 11, 2014, [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2016-02-09SASC\\_open\\_threat\\_hearing\\_transcript.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2016-02-09SASC_open_threat_hearing_transcript.pdf)

<sup>652</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp and Christopher M. Blanchard, “Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response,” *CRS*, June 14, 2013, p 3.

[https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20130614\\_RL33487\\_15d32d142c4206ebb45fff142091d667a9b4b7f6.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20130614_RL33487_15d32d142c4206ebb45fff142091d667a9b4b7f6.pdf)

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>654</sup> David Alexander, “The U.S. General Backed Arming Syrian Rebels ‘conceptually’,” *Reuters*, February 10, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria/top-u-s-general-backed-arming-syrian-rebels-conceptually-idUSBRE9190CP20130210>

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid*.

frankly are not particularly friendly to the United States of America” and that arming them was “not a good recipe for meeting American interests over the long term.”<sup>656</sup> Obama described the moderate opposition as a batch of “carpenters,” “blacksmiths” and “dentists” who could not constitute a “professional military” that the U.S. could possibly support.<sup>657</sup> In her memoir, Secretary of State Clinton recalled her support to train and equip vetted members of the opposition not for the aim of toppling Assad, but to pressure the Syrian president and his allies to accept a negotiated settlement.<sup>658</sup> Despite such limited objective, it was the “President’s inclination to stay the present course and not take the significant further step of arming the rebels.” A recurrent concern in the administration’s official discourse was that “once guns went into the country, they would be hard to control and could easily fall in the hands of extremists.”<sup>659</sup>

The effectiveness of the ‘moderate’ Syrian opposition was hampered not only by a lack of military professionalism, but also by geographical and organizational factors. The geography of Syria made it hard for the opposition to organize and control territory and therefore made any outside intervention unlikely to tip the balance against Assad forces which controlled strategic swaths of territory and the main cities like Damascus and Aleppo.<sup>660</sup> Moreover, neither the political nor the military opposition was operating under a single command or agenda, an issue that made winning a broad-based support from the public and from outside powers more problematic. The other factor that added to the weakness of the opposition was that the senior members of the Syrian government and army were Alawaite who remained loyal to Assad, out of the fear that a post-Assad Syria would usher their annihilation, and army defectors were therefore unlikely to form an effective counterbalancing block. In this context, a U.S. military intervention was likely to prolong the civil war, add to the humanitarian suffering and made the arrival at a negotiated settlement a more complicated task.<sup>661</sup> For Secretary Clinton, drawing parallels between Libya and Syria was ill-founded because in the former the opposition was able to control “large swaths of territory in the east,” while in the latter the rebels were “disorganized and diffuse,” were grabbing with holding territory and unable to organize under a unified command structure.<sup>662</sup>

---

<sup>656</sup> Obama, *Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg*

<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

<sup>658</sup> Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (UK: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p 392

<sup>659</sup> Ibid,381

<sup>660</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “The Case against Intervention in Syria,” *Washington Post*, June 1, 2012, <https://fareedzakaria.com/columns/2012/06/01/the-case-against-intervention-in-syria>

<sup>661</sup> Ibid

<sup>662</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*,389

The ‘moderate’ opposition was weak not only to the extent that it was unlikely to defeat the Assad army, its allies, and other ‘extremist’ armed groups, but also to govern and control a post-Assad Syria. In the eyes of officials in Washington, in the event Assad leaves power the United States had to commit immense resources, including large number of ground forces, for stabilization mission and to ensure that a friendly government was in place.<sup>663</sup> The recent Iraqi experience demonstrated that even with the devotion of large resources, the country is friendlier to Iran than the West, is run by a more or less sectarian government, and is riven by conflict along ideological lines. Samuel Huntington concluded that, given America’s failed past interventions, any intervention on an incremental basis or absent a full commitment to win at any cost, the United States can never achieve its objectives.<sup>664</sup> President Obama concluded that given the strength and effectiveness of the American army, deploying American troops could easily tip the balance against Assad, but their presence would be imperative for the purpose of governance, stabilization, and to deal with the sectarian divide that swept the country and part of the region, a course he was loath to take.<sup>665</sup>

To the extent that armed groups active in Syria were proxies for outside powers and their respective donors, between those partnering with the West and their Gulf allies and those allied with Russia and Iran, the balance of power was clearly in favor of Assad and his patrons. While the United States grappled with the lack of harmony and unity in the political and armed opposition, Iran and Russia were comfortable backing any group fighting alongside the government in Damascus. While the opposition was fighting to remove Assad as the first step to establish a government of choice in place, the Assad regime was already entrenched in the country and still enjoys political legitimacy and recognition of many in the outside world. Putin contends that he was backing the “only regular army” in Syria which is “the army of President al Assad” who was fighting what Russia’s “international partners interpret as an opposition” which is, in Russia’s view, a group of “terrorist organizations.”<sup>666</sup> Ideology or the nature of the political system was less a concern for Iran and the Shia militias and organizations when they supported the Assad regime. In fact, it was ideology that bound these together as the ruling family in Syria was fighting to preserve an establishment adherent to one of the sects of Shiism.

---

<sup>663</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “Obama’s Syria Policy is full of contradictions,” *Washington Post*, June 19, 2013, <https://fareedzakaria.com/columns/2013/06/19/obamas-syria-policy-is-full-of-contradictions>

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Nadia Bilbassy-Charters of Al Arabiya News Channel,” *The American Presidency Project*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-nadia-bilbassy-charters-al-arabiya-news-channel>

<sup>666</sup> Putin, *Interview to American TV*

As the conflict in Syria escalated and the death toll mounted, the confrontation between the warring parties followed a more sectarian trajectory. The Assad regime was largely perceived to be fighting an ideological war against Sunni communities, a notion that further ‘radicalized’ the ‘moderate opposition.’<sup>667</sup> Such change further complicated the Obama administration’s calculus as it put more groups in the ‘terrorist’ list and made cooperation with them more problematic. When the U.S. designated el Nusra group as a ‘terrorist organization,’ the latter received sympathy from the ‘moderate opposition.’<sup>668</sup> Meanwhile, Obama critics were emboldened and alleged that it was America’s inaction that further radicalized the opposition and that had the U.S. supported them from the outset, radical groups would never gain the momentum. Obama sympathizers, however, insist that the Syrian opposition was dominated by ‘radical Islamists’ from the beginning and even Turkey, with its leverage and close ties with the opposition, failed to unify it under a ‘moderate’ political banner.<sup>669</sup>

The rise of the group known as ISIS was a game changer in U.S. policy, either because it posed greater challenge to U.S. interests than the Assad regime or, as U.S. critics argue, it provided the pretext of fighting ‘terrorism’ to get involved in the region. Despite the presence of other groups that the U.S. considers terrorist organizations and whose agenda was at loggerhead with American preferences, fighting ISIS was made a priority.<sup>670</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry argued before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that ISIS is “distinctive” because it “holds territory and will continue - if not stopped – to seize more; because it has financial resources; because of the destabilizing impact of its activities on the broader Middle East [and] because of its pretensions to worldwide leadership”<sup>671</sup> ISIS exemplify the very challenge that non-state actors pose to the old order created by states and because they advance an “anarchic apolarity” which is shaped less by the state, its sovereignty, and its territorial integrity, and more by “a dynamic interaction between state and non-state authorities across and beyond the boundaries of states.”<sup>672</sup>

---

<sup>667</sup> Sharp and Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria*

<sup>668</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>669</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “Obama Caves to Conventional Wisdom in Syria,” *Washington Post*, July 9, 2014, <https://fareedzakaria.com/columns/2014/07/10/obama-caves-to-conventional-wisdom-on-syria>

<sup>670</sup> Kimberly Kagan, “Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” *Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, September 16, 2015, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/kagan-testimony-09-16-15>

<sup>671</sup> “Opening Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry,” *Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Committee*, March 11, 2015, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/kerry-testimony-03-11-15>

<sup>672</sup> Krieg and Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare*, 120.



Despite the broad coalition that the United States was able to garner and the partnership it made with state and non-state forces in Iraq and Syria, the Obama administration continued to face limitations to implement its policy. In a nutshell, not all America's partners on the ground were welcomed as partner forces by key members of the coalition. In the battle to capture Raqqa, the stronghold of ISIS in Syria, Turkey opposed the participation of Kurdish forces and even offered the deployment of its forces as an alternative. Turkish Prime Minister commented that "it appears that the U.S. may carry out the operation with the YPG, not with Turkey ... If this operation is carried out in this manner, there will be a cost for Turkey-US relations."<sup>673</sup> In what appears to be an attempt to allay Turkey's fears, the Pentagon announced that it did not arm the Syrian Kurdish groups directly, but provided support to Arab groups who fought with the Kurds in what is known as the Syrian Democratic Front.<sup>674</sup>

Though the Free Syrian Army enjoyed broad support from all members in the coalition, stepping up aid to the group was no less problematic. Internal politics of armed groups is a key determinant of its effectiveness and performance, and the FSA was riven by "factionalism, rivalry, inability to coordinate policies, and inability to cooperate in pursuit of common goals."<sup>675</sup> Further support to the group would likely incite expanded support to the Assad regime from its outside backers, would unlikely to lead to a final triumph of one side over the other, and would prolong and stalemate the conflict.<sup>676</sup> Even when the group was able to make inroads at the expense of the Syrian army by late 2012, it was the heavy support of Iran through its Special Forces and Shia militias that reversed the momentum. The leader of the group in Homs Fateh Hassoun told Al Jazeera that "After the Iranian and Hezbollah intervention, the regime started making gains on the ground, especially in the central regions of Homs and Hama."<sup>677</sup>

The challenge of working with local forces did not end with the vetting and training process, but extend to the willingness of coalition forces to come to their defense if attacked by the Syrian air force or those of its allies. In response to a question from John McCain in an Armed Services Committee hearing on whether the U.S. would "repel Assad's air assets that will be attacking [the rebels]," the then Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel confirmed that

---

<sup>673</sup> Carla Humud, Christopher Blanchard and Mary Beth Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," *CRS*, October 13, 2017, 4, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a168ccc4.pdf>

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>675</sup> Stephan Biddle, "Evaluating U.S. Options for Iraq," *CFR*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/report/evaluating-us-options-iraq>

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>677</sup> Ali Younes and Shafik Mandhai, "FSA Rebels: We would have Won if not for Iran," *Al Jazeera*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/fsa-rebels-won-iran-171022110625326.html>



“Any attack on those that we have trained and who are supporting us, we will help ’em.” In an interview with Foreign Policy after he left office, Hagel admitted that the White House never came to that decision and that he improvised the answer in order to not anger U.S. allies in the region. Hagel commented that had he declined U.S. readiness to protect these forces, “every ally would have walked away from us in the Middle East.”<sup>678</sup>

In Iraq, some explain what they see as a lack of U.S. support to the Iraqi security forces to the poor control of the state over these forces. The vacuum created by a failed government was thus filled by Iranian-backed Shia militias like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahlelhak which operated independently from the Iraqi Security Forces and had worked to weaken U.S. influence in Iraq during the occupation.<sup>679</sup> These groups even worked against the stated military strategy of the Iraqi central government in order to exercise more sway on the military trajectory of the fight against ISIS. The contestation for control over Iraqi land and politics has not only been between Iraq and ISIS, but also between the Iraqi state and Iranian militias.<sup>680</sup>

The extent of U.S. involvement in Iraq and Syria was also calculated on the level of threat posed by active armed groups loyal to Iran. The former U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford reported the concern of officials in Washington over possible Iranian retaliation through its proxies against American troops in Iraq if the U.S. expanded its support to the Syrian opposition. In Iraq, Iran tolerated American military presence as long as it served their common interest, which is defeating ISIS. But when the latter is defeated, the Iranians “will want us to leave” Ford predicted, “and they will encourage us by a variety of means, including mortar strikes and rocket strikes.”<sup>681</sup> Iranian proxies in both Iraq and Syria became a de facto part of the Iranian state and as such U.S. policy towards them is calculated as part of its approach towards Tehran. A heavy-handed stance against these groups could affect the ongoing nuclear talks, strengthen the stance of ‘hardliners’ within the Iranian regime and weaken the more ‘moderate’ policies of the sitting president.<sup>682</sup>

---

<sup>678</sup> Micah Zenko, “Chuck Hagel Astonishing Admission on Syria,” *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/chuck-hagel-obama-syria/421293/>

<sup>679</sup> Kagan, *Statement before the Senate*

<sup>680</sup> Ibid.

<sup>681</sup> Michael Crowley, “Iran might Attack American Troops in Iraq, U.S. Officials Fear,” *Politico*, March 25, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/could-iran-attack-us-troops-in-iraq-116365>

<sup>682</sup> Melissa G. Delton, “Defeating the Iranian Threat Network: Options for Countering Iranian Proxies,” *CSIS*, November 29, 2016, [http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/congressional\\_testimony/ts161206\\_Dalton\\_Testimony.pdf](http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/congressional_testimony/ts161206_Dalton_Testimony.pdf)

Even with its tacit approval of the coalition operations in Iraq, Moscow continued to contest the campaign's legitimacy in Syria. Putin criticized what he sees a disparity between the level of threat posed by ISIS and the strategy used to deal with it, namely the overreliance on airstrikes.<sup>683</sup> Based on norms of legitimacy and state sovereignty, Putin asserted that the campaign is carried out without the authorization of the U.N. Security Council, and in Syria without the consent of the local "legitimate authorities."<sup>684</sup> Russia's opposition to the U.S.-led campaign in Syria did not end at verbal condemnation, but took a military form with the Russian air force bombing the rebels backed by the West when they appeared to gain ground against Assad forces. The *New York Times* reported that by late 2015, the Russian military campaign "was focusing squarely on the C.I.A.-backed fighters battling Syrian government troops."<sup>685</sup> The Russia president insisted that he was fighting terrorists, accused Washington of using them to achieve "political aims," namely to fight Bashar al Assad, and concluded that Americans are wrong to think that these "radicals" can "live by civilized rules after they have tasted victory."<sup>686</sup> Putin opined that any attempt to deter the 'terrorist threat' should be carried out "transparently and without any hidden agenda" and this can be done by the consent of the "UN Security Council, strict compliance with international law," and on "the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of other states."<sup>687</sup>

The resistance of Russia, China and Iran to U.S. involvement in Syria went beyond the protection of their interests in the country and the wider region. While their interests were far more vital in Syria than those of the United States, they wanted to limit what the U.S. could do on the principle that their growing power and influence is not reflected in the decision making of regional and international affairs and that the United States can no longer conduct policy without taking into account the interests and views of others. The limits imposed by these powers on the exercise of American power in the region were compounded by the rise of non-state actors whose views, intentions and objectives, if ever known, were largely incompatible with U.S. objectives and preferences. As the deployment of large American

---

<sup>683</sup> Putin, *Interview to the Al-Ahram Daily*

<sup>684</sup> Ibid.

<sup>685</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A War in Syria," *New York Times*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-trump.html>

<sup>686</sup> Vladimir Putin "Answers to Questions from French Journalists from TF1 TV Channel," *Kremlin*, October 12, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/53081>

<sup>687</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Interview to Anadolu Agency," *Kremlin*, November 28, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/47104>

troops became a far more dubious option following the Iraq experience, relying on these groups as proxies or surrogates continued to raise serious concerns.

## **Conclusion**

America's relative decline had a direct impact on the trajectory of Obama's Middle East policy not only in the way it limited the resources available to conduct an ambitious foreign policy, but also by putting at risk America's place in the international system. In order to compete with rising powers, the Obama administration had to reset its priorities at the domestic, regional and international level. Domestically, resources were directed towards sectors that would improve the country's competitive hedge internationally. Even within the Pentagon, traditional and costly ways of 'doing business' were substituted with 'low cost' alternatives. At the regional level, limited resources also made easing tensions with Iran and the conclusion of a nuclear deal a priority that trumped the Israeli-Palestinian issue or affecting reform in Iraq or a regime change in Syria. Internationally, as the Middle East was relegated in Obama's global priorities the Asia Pacific took the lion's share of the administration's attention and resources.

Obama's Middle East policy was hampered by more than limited resources, but also with a regional environment rife with competition for influence not only from America's traditional state rivals, but also by non-state actors. Russia and China resorted to the same institutions that have been the instrument for the exercise of American power. In the U.N. Security Council, the two powers' attempt to limit what the U.S. could do went beyond the objective of protecting their material interests but aimed to contest the very norms that have long guided American foreign policy. Counterbalancing one of the most effective instruments of conducting foreign policy, economic sanctions, became the policy of Iran and Russia through their economic and military support to the Assad regime. Even the reliance on proxies and surrogates to achieve policy objective was rendered more or less obsolete as the most organized and effective groups were on the side of U.S. adversaries or were fighting to undermine the very regional order that the U.S. has worked to sustain.

American power and the regional environment, though very critical in influencing American foreign policy, cannot explain the change in Obama foreign policy in isolation. What is also indispensable to the understanding of such change is how decision makers in Washington perceived American power and what it is capable to achieve in the context of the perceived role of their country in the world. The perception of the Middle East by these officials in

terms of the forces driving change in the region and the extent to which American power can bring about the desired change is also critical. The examination of such perceptions would be the aim of the coming chapter.

# **Chapter Five**

## **Obama' Perceptions and the Making of Middle East Policy**

## **Introduction**

America's relative power and the regional environment, while of much significance to explain Obama's Middle East policy, are not sufficient in isolation and should be viewed from leaders' perspectives. In this context, neoclassical realists argue that analyzing a state's foreign policy from a realist perspective provides only partial interpretation of how foreign policy is made. What is needed therefore is a "transmission belt" through which the state's relative power is interpreted and converted into policy. Because the real decision makers of the state are its leaders, it is their perceptions of the state's power and the international environment that provides the needed parsimony to understand why specific decisions are made. As political systems differ and different leaders exercise varying degrees of influence on policy making, what is needed is a prior determination of whose perceptions among the state's decision makers are most consequential in directing the state's foreign policy.

This chapter argues that the American president has long dominated American foreign policy making and President Obama only validated this tradition. Besides the constitutional power invested in the executive to conduct foreign policy, the judiciary has often validated the President's prerogative to direct international relations when Congress attempts to exercise its constitutional power of oversight. The influence of the American President on policy making and the deference of the legislative to the President in matters of war and peace have only grown in a changing international environment. With some limited exceptions, President Obama continued to exercise his presidential prerogatives as a head of the executive and as a Commander in Chief. The formation of the national security team and the micromanagement of the White House gave Obama an unquestioned sway on the deliberations and the final outcomes of foreign policy decisions. When engaged in military actions like airstrikes, drone operations or a limited war like the campaign on ISIS, President Obama either relied on the power of his post as a Commander in Chief or on broad interpretations of previous congressional authorizations to use military force. In this context, Congress either supported the President, especially through its leadership, or exercised oversight that did not materialize in substantive change in the direction of foreign policy. Understanding Obama's perceptions of American power, the regional environment of the Middle East and America's role in the region is therefore indispensable to get a better grasp of US Middle East policy under Obama.

President Obama made the accurate understanding of American power, and above all its limitations, a guiding principle of his foreign policy. While he admits that material resources are not finite and are diminishing, Obama's perception of American power, and especially its military force, is measured mostly by what it can achieve. The President often argues that the diffused nature of threats facing the United States and the limited objectives the US military could achieve in the last two major wars signifies that the US military is only one element of American power that should be complemented by a whole of government approach that combines the economy, diplomacy and development. For the new century to be America's, the United States should build trust in the liberal international system to revive the country's competitive edge in clean energy, education, research and technology.

A military approach that characterized American foreign policy of the late administration is less relevant in a twenty-first century international system and nowhere was this more evident than in the Middle East. Even before becoming president, Obama the Illinois Senator and the Congressman held a different view of the Middle East, the sources of its dynamics and America's regional allies and adversaries. In a region where ideological differences that date back centuries dictate the regional dynamics and where anti-Americanism remains rife, the United States should be careful in how to protect its interests and advance its values, especially through the exercise of military force. In dealing with what Obama sees as a large and powerful country like Iran, a military approach should be the last resort and diplomacy, especially to arrive at a nuclear deal, is the best course to mitigate problems. Obama's message to what he once called America's 'so-called allies' seems to encourage domestic reform and self-reliance to manage their "neighborhood" and not to look for the United States as the ultimate provider of security.

The role Obama envisions for his country in the Middle East is therefore born out of his perception of American power, its limitations and the sources of regional dynamics. As a hardheaded realist, Obama sees the protection of America's core interests in the region the ultimate objective which can be best served by maintaining a regional balance of power and not through costly nation building or an ambitious agenda of democratization. As a visionary idealist, Obama also considers change in the region a generational project which can be only carried out by people in the region. The power of American ideals and values, Obama contends, are more powerful instruments than its military force to influence the direction of vents in the region.

## 1- Presidential Preeminence in the Making of American Foreign Policy

The American presidency expanded its power in foreign policy making, usually at the expense of Congress, thanks to the nature of the post, the development of events and the changing nature of America's role in the world. When in dispute on exercising power in international affairs, the presidency often prevails over Congress through the rulings of the judiciary. Such change in the balance of power between the two branches did not follow a linear process but was rather a cycle of resurgence and decline in the power of each branch in the exercise of its constitutional rights. While Congress's mindful deference of its power to the executive was partly a contributing factor to a burgeoning presidency, Congressional attempts to exercise its constitutional rights were often thwarted by a presidency exercising its own constitutional prerogatives.

The American constitution aims for a balance of power between the legislative and the executive not only through a separation of powers but also by the sharing of functions. In foreign policy specifically, some functions are assigned to Congress, others to the presidency and some are left to the two authorities to work in conjunction.<sup>688</sup> This diffusion of power does not mean, however, that each branch exercises its functions with a complete exclusion of the other. While for example the president is entitled to make treaties with other countries, Congressional consent is indispensable for their finalization and implementation mainly because of the legislative's power to appropriate funds.<sup>689</sup> The sharing of functions is also evident in the executive's participation in the legislative process. The framers of the constitution granted the presidency "many though not all powers considered 'executive' .... including the powers to interpret and execute laws and treaties, handle the country's international relations, and act as commander in chief."<sup>690</sup> Similarly, Congress is assigned not only to legislative functions but is also entitled to participate in "executive" practices like the power to declare war, approve executive appointments and to grant letters of marque and reprisal.<sup>691</sup>

---

<sup>688</sup> Louis Fisher, "Foreign Policy Powers of the President and Congress," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 499, no. 1 (September 1988): 149

<sup>689</sup> Ibid, 149-150

<sup>690</sup> Abraham D. Sofaer, "Presidential Power and National Security," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1, Special Issue: Invoking Inherent Presidential Powers (March 2007): 102

<sup>691</sup> Ibid. .



Such overlap in functions is deliberate and is meant as a substitute for imposing limitations on each branch in the exercise of its responsibilities. This constitutional peculiarity aims “to give each branch the constitutional means and the personal motives to resist encroachments on its functions by the others.”<sup>692</sup> While this diffusion of powers and interdependence of functions is often argued to be the best safeguard of liberty, it also poses intricate challenges especially in making foreign policy. Edward S. Corwin describes such attribute as an “invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy.”<sup>693</sup> Corwin further noted that “for those who think that constitution makers ought to leave considerable leeway for future play of political forces, it should be a vision realized.”<sup>694</sup>

The “play of political forces” has certainly been in favor of the presidency which made an expanded control of foreign policy making a foregone conclusion. The “invitation to struggle” made the rulings of the judiciary the deciding force on disputes between the legislative and the executive. In most cases, court decisions supported an expanded power of the presidency in foreign affairs. In *The United States vs Curtiss-Wright* (1936), the Supreme Court accorded an unprecedented power to the president in the conduct of foreign policy. Justice Sutherland ruled that in international affairs Congress “must often accord to the president a degree of discretion and freedom from statutory restriction which would not be admissible were domestic affairs alone involved.”<sup>695</sup> In defense of the Iran-Contra affair, Colonel North relied on such case to defend U.S. military conduct and noted that in order to advance U.S. foreign policy; the President can conduct secret activities and negotiations. North further noted that the president holds sensitive information that necessitates secrecy and the exposure of which would have ramifications.<sup>696</sup>

In the case of the embargo on Arab oil in 1975, the Supreme Court once again supported the delegation of foreign policy making from the legislative to the executive. The Carter administration imposed a fee on imported Arab oil and raised questions on the legality of the measure as raising tariffs is an exclusive Congressional responsibility. The President’s policy was first upheld by a federal court and received the unanimous support of the Supreme Court which ruled that the action was “within the scope of the Trade Expansion Act and its

---

<sup>692</sup>Ibid

<sup>693</sup> Edward S. Corwin quoted in Timothy S. Boylan, “War Powers, Constitutional Balance, and the "Imperial Presidency" Idea at Century's End,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (June 1999): 234

<sup>694</sup> Ibid

<sup>695</sup>Louis Fisher, *Constitutional Conflicts between Congress and the President*(Kansas:University Press of Kansas, 2014), 152-153

<sup>696</sup> Ibid

legislative history.”<sup>697</sup>The attempt of members of Congress to challenge the Reagan administration in court for what they saw as a repeated violation of the War Powers Resolution proved futile. The courts advised that Congress “had to assert its own legislative powers to constrain the President and not look initially for judicial relief.”<sup>698</sup> Attempts by individuals to hold the Bush administration in contempt in 1990 faced the same fate. In *Ange vs Bush*, district courts judged that the President’s decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia “presented non-justifiable political questions.” In the case of *Dellums vs Bush*, the court concluded that the case was not ready for judicial consideration unless the President challenged a Congressional statute constraining his actions.<sup>699</sup>

The changing nature of foreign policy making along with the attributes of the Presidency made an expanded role of the executive in foreign affairs inevitable. The possession of sensitive information and the ability to take instant decisions is clearly in favor of the presidency and an incentive for expanding its power in international affairs. While this latter has the capacity to gather, store, and analyze large amounts of technical information, Congress is less qualified to do so and relies most of the time on the executive as a source of information. This advantage leads to another which is creativity, an element that enables the executive to decide on the feasibility of different courses of actions and policies. The element of time is also in favor of the executive which, thanks to its centralized decision making, can act swiftly in times of wars and crises. Although Congress has the power of the purse to appropriate funds, it has usually had little control over how such funds are disbursed by the executive.<sup>700</sup>

Unlike Congress whose politics is driven by short term and electoral calculations, the Presidency has the privilege of strategic and long-term planning of the country’s national interests.<sup>701</sup> Congress, moreover, has a tendency to focus on narrow foreign policy issues and lacks the grasp of the big picture. The executive, with its expertise and sustained focus on foreign policy, has the capacity to deal with more complex matters in a context of broader patterns of international politics.<sup>702</sup> A centralized and strong leadership is another aspect that distinguishes the presidency and is indispensable for quick and informed decision making.

---

<sup>697</sup> Ibid, 110

<sup>698</sup> Ibid,308

<sup>699</sup> Ibid,309

<sup>700</sup> James Robinson, *Congress and Foreign Policy Making*(Illinois:Dorsey Press, 1962), p 193

<sup>701</sup> Lee H. Hamilton, “Congress and The Presidency in American Foreign Policy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 509

<sup>702</sup> Ibid

Joseph Nye contends that the U.S. arrival at a position of global primacy would have been impossible without a strong leadership which directed the key transformations in American foreign policy in the last century.<sup>703</sup>

Transformational events like the Second World War and the Cold War helped expand the constitutional powers the executive enjoys. Although the power to declare and conduct war was meant to be a constitutionally shared responsibility between Congress and the presidency, the executive continues to dominate such arena since the Second World War. Because of what is believed to be its “messy and inconsistent deliberations,” Congress has been relegated in matters of war and peace.<sup>704</sup> Before WW2, when the standing army was not as significant, Congress used to have the upper hand in raising and funding the army but after the war and with the expansion of the military establishment, presidents have had more power to set the military agenda of the nation.<sup>705</sup>

During the Cold War Congress occupied a subordinate position for a number of reasons. Apart from the constitutional powers of the President that allows him much leeway to conduct foreign policy, the executive acted in a context of a heightened perception of threat posed by the Soviet Union which, in the eyes of Americans, put the very security and survival of the United States at stake. This was also intensified by the repeated tensions leading to regional wars that needed quick and expedient decisions from an “informed” and “experienced” presidency. Congress on its part recognized the “expertise” of the presidency in foreign policy as it presides over a strong bureaucracy and enjoys confidence in dealing with foreign affairs. More importantly, the marginal role of Congress was the result of a shared consensus about America’s role in the world as the leader of the “free world” against a totalitarian and expansionist Soviet Union. Even when disagreement occurred between the executive and the legislative, it centered mostly on the means of conducting foreign policy rather than on its ultimate objectives.<sup>706</sup>

This expansionist trend of the presidency in foreign policy making was not without congressional activism. Post-war environment like the one prevailed after the Vietnam War raised questions about the limits of presidential power and the role of Congress to tame it. In

---

<sup>703</sup>Nye,*Presidential Leadership*,137

<sup>704</sup> Roger H. Davidson, “‘Invitation to Struggle’: An Overview of Legislative-Executive Relations,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*499, no. 1(September 1988): 20

<sup>705</sup> Ibid, p21

<sup>706</sup> John Spanier and Joseph Noguee, *Congress, the Presidency and American Foreign Policy*(USA: Pergamon Press 1981)

an attempt to regain some of its preeminence in checking the power of the executive, Congress passed the War Powers Act which aimed to limit the President's ability to wage wars or get involved in military conflicts overseas.<sup>707</sup> Congress also put limits on the Executive Agreements the president can conclude by making congressional ratification mandatory when the commitments they incur are "significant".<sup>708</sup> The ability of the CIA to engage in covert and overt operations in foreign lands was also curtailed by the oversight of Congressional committees concerned.<sup>709</sup>

Despite such measures the presidency continued to find ways to circumvent congressional oversight. The "power of the purse," or Congress's exclusive right to appropriate funding did not prevent the executive from going its way in conducting foreign policy. When Congress put caps on funding the Vietnam War the Nixon administration turned to America's East Asian allies like South Korea and the Philippines soliciting their financial support to continue the war. In the Iran-Contra affair the Reagan administration helped finance pro-American militants in Nicaragua through secret military sales to Iran.<sup>710</sup> American presidents also resorted to international organizations to procure legitimacy for their actions when Congress proved intransigent. In the Korean War Truman resorted to the U.N. Security Council to justify U.S. involvement in the conflict.<sup>711</sup> To advance the case for military operations overseas, Clinton relied on the U.N. Security Council to affect regime change in Haiti and turned to the UNSC and NATO to launch airstrikes on Serbian targets in Bosnia and to deploy 20,000 troops.<sup>712</sup> When a U.N. mandate for the use of military force against Yugoslavia proved unsuccessful, NATO remained Clinton's last resort for legitimacy.<sup>713</sup>

With a strong presidency and an entrenched image of state leaders as the architects and makers of American primacy, occupants of the oval office revoked more often than not what they see as the "inherent powers" of the post to justify their foreign policy choices. Scholars distinguish between express, implied and inherent powers. Express powers are those clearly stated in the constitution and implied ones are those that "can be reasonably drawn from express powers."<sup>714</sup> The Black Law Dictionary describes inherent power as an "authority

---

<sup>707</sup> Ibid.

<sup>708</sup> Ibid

<sup>709</sup> Ibid.

<sup>710</sup> Fisher, *Foreign Policy Powers*, 157

<sup>711</sup> Fisher, *Congress and Foreign Policy*

<sup>712</sup> Ibid

<sup>713</sup> Ibid

<sup>714</sup> Louis Fisher, "Introduction: Invoking Inherent Powers: A Primer," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1, Special Issue: Invoking Inherent Presidential Powers (March 2007): 1-2

possessed without its being derived from another” and “over and beyond those explicitly granted in the constitution or reasonably to be implied from express powers.” A later version of the dictionary described such power as “that necessarily derives from an office, position, or status.”<sup>715</sup> Such broad definition of inherit powers have made their use to justify presidential actions, which are otherwise unconstitutional, irresistible.

Although presidents during the Cold War resorted to such powers to justify their military interventions abroad, the fall of the Soviet Union and the lack of a unifying sense of threat made their use more compelling. In 1950 the United States got involved in the military conflict in Korea without Congressional approval and in violation of international law. President Truman argued that the act did not amount to a war but represented a “police action.”<sup>716</sup> In reporting to Congress on the military operation to evacuate U.S. nationals from Cambodia in April 1975 President Ford revoked his right to do so as the head of the executive and as a Commander in Chief.<sup>717</sup> In September 1982 the Reagan administration dispatched troops to Lebanon without Congressional authorization and, while the President abided by the War Powers Resolution by reporting to Congress about the operation, he never invoked the sixty days limit set by the resolution.<sup>718</sup> Following the UNSC resolution to overthrow the sitting government in Haiti by “all necessary means” President Clinton did not see it necessary to obtain a Congressional authorization commenting that “like my predecessors of both parties, I have not agreed that I was constitutionally mandated” to do so.<sup>719</sup> Before committing U.S. troops in Bosnia, Clinton noted that he was “not going to lay down” his constitutional prerogatives if Congress object to his decision.<sup>720</sup>

No president worked to expand the role of the presidency and the use of its “inherit powers” in foreign policy more than George W. Bush. Despite the overwhelming support he received from Congress, Bush continued to justify U.S. military actions abroad by the power of his post. On September 14, 2001 Congress passed an act authorizing the President “to use all necessary and appropriate force” against those who committed or aided the 9/11 attacks and

---

<sup>715</sup> Ibid.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid,5

<sup>717</sup>Fisher, *Constitutional Conflicts*, 307

<sup>718</sup>Naseer H. Aruri, “The United States' Intervention In Lebanon,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4, The Realignment of Power in Lebanon: Internal and External Dimensions (Fall 1985)

<sup>719</sup>Louis Fisher, Constitutional Conflicts between Congress and the President, op. cit. , p 310

<sup>720</sup>Ibid

to “prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States.”<sup>721</sup> In reporting to Congress on deploying the U.S. military abroad, namely in Afghanistan, the President noted that “ I have taken these actions pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct U.S. foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and as Chief Executive,” referring to Congress and its authorization as only a “support” that he appreciated.<sup>722</sup> In all his reports to Congress from 2004 to 2008 on the military operations in “the global war on terrorism,” the president continued to justify his administration’s actions through Article two of the constitution with no reference to the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF).<sup>723</sup>

President Bush resorted to other executive practices to exercise what he considered presidential prerogatives. Even before 9/11 events the Bush administrations put limits on the Freedom of Information Act by making access to information in the hands of the executive harder and by classifying documents that were already declassified.<sup>724</sup> In its “global war on terror” the administration expanded the use of military tribunals to try aliens suspected of attacking the United States. In 2002 six Algerians were detained in Guantanamo prison as “enemy combatants” and were charged with suspected attacks on the U.S. embassy in Bosnia. In *Boumediene vs Bush*, the suspects claimed their detention violated the U.S. Constitution and international law to which a district court ruled that the plaintiffs were not citizens of the U.S., were detained in an overseas territory and therefore had no right for a habeas corpus.<sup>725</sup> The decision was further reinforced by the Military Commissions Act passed by Congress in 2006 which forbade federal courts from accepting habeas corpus cases from any detainee considered as an “enemy combatant”.<sup>726</sup>

Congressional support of the president’s unconstitutional practices was primary the consequence of bipartisan politics. Evidence suggests that whenever the president’s party controls Congress, the executive finds much leeway to conduct foreign policy the way it sees fit.<sup>727</sup> Such pattern of practice created what Franz-Josef Meiers describes as a state of

---

<sup>721</sup>“Public Law 107–40—SEPT. 18, 2001” *GOP*, <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>

<sup>722</sup> Mathew Weed, “Presidential Reference to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force in Publicly Available Executive Actions and Reports to Congress,” *CRS*, May 11, 2013, 3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/pres-aumf.pdf>

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid.* , p 6.

<sup>724</sup> Andrew Rudalevige, “The Contemporary Presidency: The Decline and Resurgence and Decline (and Resurgence?)”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (September 2006): 511

<sup>725</sup> “Boumediene vs Bush”, *Oyez*, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2007/06-1195>

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>727</sup>William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse, “When Congress Stops Wars: Partisan Politics and Presidential Power,”*Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2007): 96

“hyperpartisanship” which “weakened the institutional incentives that founders had assigned to Congress to jealously defend its constitutional prerogatives vis a vis the executive.”<sup>728</sup> While the president’s party supports the president policy regardless of its virtue and popularity, the opposition party lacks the will to cooperate with the presidency and tend to depreciate the merits of its policy choices.<sup>729</sup>

A primary factor for Congress to abandon its constitutional role is the loss of its “institutional identity.” Republicans who controlled Congress in the first seven years of the Bush presidency acted “as field lieutenants in the president’s army rather than as members of an independent branch of government.”<sup>730</sup> From the time he came to office until 2006, President Bush never used his veto power against legislative initiatives explaining that he did not have to do so when Congress did what it had been asked to do.<sup>731</sup> The number of Congressional hearings is a strong indicator of the extent to which Congress lives up to its constitutional responsibility. Even when the presidency occupied a center stage in policy making during the Second World War, Truman pressed for the creation of a committee that investigated alleged military overspending. The committee presided over 50 hearings and produced 50 reports. Comparatively, with the hearings held by appropriation committees aside, the number of congressional hearings dropped from 782 in the first half of 1983 to 287 in the same period of 1997.<sup>732</sup>

Even when the opposition party dominates Congress or one of its chambers the President dominates foreign policy making. Instead of waiting for the final reports from U.N inspectors about the U.S. claims of Iraq’s development of chemical weapons, a Senate dominated by democrats was ready to pass the Iraq Resolution Act which gave the President unchecked power to use force. Although the U.N and U.S. reports found no evidence of Iraqi possession or efforts of developing chemical and biological weapons, Congress remained supportive of the president’s policy.<sup>733</sup> When the Democrats controlled Congress in early 2007 and the Bush war strategy in Iraq proved a debacle, the President continued to determine the trajectory of foreign policy. Democratic lawmakers’ attempt to impose a withdrawal deadline

---

<sup>728</sup> Franz-Josef Meiers “The Return of the Imperial Presidency: President, Congress, and U.S. Foreign Policy after 11 September 2001” *American Studies* 55, no. 2 (2010): 274

<sup>729</sup> Ibid.

<sup>730</sup> Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, “When Congress Checks Out,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 6 (November/December 2006): 79

<sup>731</sup> Rudalevige, *The Contemporary Presidency*

<sup>732</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>733</sup> Fisher, *Constitutional Conflicts*, 312-313

through their “power of the purse” was thwarted by the President’s use or the threat of using presidential veto power.<sup>734</sup> As the supplement bills for the war that made the provision of further funding dependent on setting a date for withdrawal was vetoed by the president, Congress was forced to approve a 95 billion in May 2007 to fund the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and another 70\$ billion in December of the same year.<sup>735</sup>

Presidential dominance of foreign policy making has been proportionate to the expanding power of the executive at the expense of Congress. The possession of information by the White House, its expertise and expediency in policy making, and the centralized leadership of the executive are attributes that gave the presidency the upper hand in foreign policy making. Congress itself recognized its disadvantageous position and often prefers to defer some of its constitutional prerogatives to the President. When Congress chooses to challenge the presidency in matters of international relations it had do so at its own peril thanks to an effective presidential veto power, a commanding image of the post among the public and, above all, the executive’s expert ability to make use of its inherit powers and prerogatives.

---

<sup>734</sup>Robert McMahon, “The Impact of the 110th Congress on U.S. Foreign Policy,” *CFR*, December 21, 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/background/impact-110th-congress-us-foreign-policy>

<sup>735</sup> Ibid.



## **2- President Obama and the Dominance of Middle East Policy Making**

The Obama presidency was no less different from its predecessors, with the President exerting control over the making of foreign policy and Congress's continued deference of its powers to the Chief Executive. A centralized decision making within the White House, the escalation of some counterterrorism practices, the exercise of executive privileges in war making and the burgeoning role of executive agreements were marked and recurring themes in the Obama administration. This is not rather unconventional as American Presidents rarely give up powers the office has accumulated in the course of more than a century. As Julian Zelizer suggests, "Presidents don't tend to give back power on their own volition," and even in Obama's first year in office it was hard to assume that his "election made a serious dent in the strength of the executive branch."<sup>736</sup> Such conclusion became only more evident by the end of his presidency.

### **2-1 The Obama White House and Micromanagement**

A key feature of the Obama White House, also typical of a burgeoning presidency, was a centralized decision making process. This was a trend that not only senior officials attested to but was evident in many foreign policy decisions taken in Obama's two terms in office. While Obama took the lead in defining and shaping the country's foreign policy, he was in many ways a transactional president that did not affect much change in the broad contours of American international relations. Paul Krugman observed that in foreign policy, unlike in domestic politics, Obama did not exceed expectations and was rather a normal post-war president who was set to reduce the country's international commitments, and by continuing the same counterterrorism practices like targeted killings, he did not challenge some of the traditions of the National Security establishment.<sup>737</sup>

This lack of challenge to the National Security establishment was evident despite the formation of a National Security team that was in line with the president's preferences. The appointment of the US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice in the national security team and vice president Joseph Biden as head of the team is revealing of the secondary role Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Robert Defense Gates and CIA director Leon Panetta would play in national security decision making. Both Biden and James Jones, Obama's

---

<sup>736</sup>Jack Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint: The Accountable Presidency after 9/11* (U.S: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), p x

<sup>737</sup> Paul Krugman, "In Defense of Obama: The Nobel Prize-winning economist, once one of the president's most notable critics, on why Obama is a historic success," *RollingStone*, October 8, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/in-defense-of-obama-171648/>

national security adviser, were above cabinet officers in the hierarchy of the national security team.<sup>738</sup> Along with the tight circle of this team, Obama occupied a central role in shaping and deciding the final outcomes of its debates. In formulating the national military strategy President Obama participated actively to influence its direction. In the process, Secretary of Defense Panetta noted, “President Obama participated throughout—rare for a commander in chief in a matter of strategic planning—and thus not only approved of the result but also had a direct hand in shaping it.”<sup>739</sup>

While Clinton, Gates and Panetta were members of the national security cabinet, they were not part of the foreign policy team of the Obama administration.<sup>740</sup> The appointment of these figures to key positions was driven mostly by political considerations, mainly to satisfy a good part of the American constituency and to sell out an image of a diversified cabinet. These officials formed a “government of strangers” who lacked a common political linkage and vision, and were therefore not able to build a strong relationship between the different government departments and with the White House team.<sup>741</sup>

What is common between cabinet officers in the national security team was their agreement on what they saw as the micromanagement style of the Obama White House. Time and again these officials and even their subordinates complained about their inability to make their voices heard or to influence foreign policy making. Secretary Clinton admitted that although she came to office with her own views and preferences in foreign policy, she was aware of her limits and believed in the old adage that “the buck did stop with the president.”<sup>742</sup> With the events unfolding in the Middle East and with subsequent U.S. responses, such belief proved only more accurate. When protests erupted in Iran in June 2009 Clinton advocated a hard-line response to the Iranian government, but President Obama decided not to entangle the United States “in the middle of the crisis” because it was the “right thing for the protesters and for democracy.”<sup>743</sup> In dealing with the Syrian crisis, Clinton and CIA director David Petraeus argued strongly for arming the Syrian rebels and presented a plan for this to the President. The aim, as stated by Clinton, was not to build an army capable of bringing down

---

<sup>738</sup>Shirley Anne Warshaw, “Obama’s National Security Cabinet: The Fight to Survive White House Micromanagement,” in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley (New York:Routledge, 2018),94

<sup>739</sup> Leon Panetta with Jim Newton, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*(New York:Penguin Books, 2015)

<sup>740</sup>Warshaw, *Obama’s National Security*, 94

<sup>741</sup> Ibid.

<sup>742</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*,22

<sup>743</sup> Ibid, 354

Assad but to ensure a military stalemate that would prod the Assad regime to make concessions. Despite what the Department of State and the CIA saw as a limited operation both in scope and objectives, President Obama's preference was "not to take the significant further steps of arming rebels."<sup>744</sup>

Vali Nasr, a senior adviser in the State Department, lamented the waning influence of foreign policy experts in a White House where even senior officials like Hillary Clinton and Richard Holbrooke "had to fight to have their voices count on major foreign policy initiatives."<sup>745</sup> When taking foreign policy decisions the president had to rely not on the foreign policy establishment, its expertise and judgment but on "a small cabal of relatively inexperienced White House advisers whose turf was strictly politics."<sup>746</sup> The primary concern of the Obama administration was not to meet its promise of a new era in dealing with the Middle East but how to win a partisan battle with Republicans through media and election campaign.<sup>747</sup> Although Clinton accepted the post with the precondition of having regular face to face meetings with the President, Vali attested that she "had a tough time getting the administration to bite" and "had to fight tooth and nail to have a hearing at the White House."<sup>748</sup> Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, never had a face to face meeting with the President, was deprived of the full authority to complete his mission and was overwhelmed by the president's close advisers who were determined to make his initiatives a failure for political ends.<sup>749</sup>

Pentagon senior officials were no less irritated by the micromanagement style of the White House. From the start of his mission as Obama's first Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates "could already see a president and White House staff, as many before them, seeking total control and trying to centralize all power in the White House."<sup>750</sup> Gates admitted that this trend is not new as presidents have only increased their grip on foreign policy making, but the White House under Obama "was by far the most centralized and controlling in national

---

<sup>744</sup> Ibid, 392

<sup>745</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (London: Scribe, 2013), 1

<sup>746</sup> Ibid

<sup>747</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>748</sup> Vali Nasr, "The Inside Story of How the White House Let Diplomacy Fail in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/04/the-inside-story-of-how-the-white-house-let-diplomacy-fail-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>749</sup> Ibid

<sup>750</sup> Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (UK: WH Allen, 2014), 301

security of any I had seen since Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.”<sup>751</sup> Political considerations might be of significance in nurturing this centralization but they remained marginal as the president repeatedly took decisions that generate opposition from his close advisers or were not in line with his party’s and interest groups’ preferences.<sup>752</sup> Afghanistan stands as a case in point when the Pentagon’s proposal was rebuffed by a Commander in Chief exercising his presidential prerogatives. When an information was leaked from a NATO meeting signaling the Pentagon’s plan to start the transition in 2014, Obama berated the military’s unilateralism and asserted his “intention to begin the security transition in July 2011 and complete it by the end of 2014,” warning that he would “push back very hard if anyone proposes” a delay in the transition.<sup>753</sup>

When the debate on the number of residual troops to leave in Iraq after the withdrawal heated in the Obama administration, it was the president who finally “settled matters.” In principle, the Pentagon was advocating a larger residual force, but the White House, given the calculations of domestic politics and budgetary concerns, was looking for the least number possible. Before handing over the command of U.S. forces in Iraq to Lloyd Austin, Ray Ordieno recommended leaving a force between 10000 and 15000. General Austin advised for at least 16000 troops and so did the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In a meeting of principals convened on August 10<sup>th</sup> 2011, the New Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta advised the White House to negotiate a presence of up to 10000 troops with the Iraqi government, a plan Secretary Clinton supported as it could help the civilian mission carrying its training and assistance missions. In a meeting with Mullen, Panetta and Clinton on August 13<sup>th</sup>, President Obama eventually decided on a maximum of 5000 residual troops, excluding both the 10000 and 7000 options, arguing that leaving a force to manage the Arab Kurdish borders and tensions was not indispensable.<sup>754</sup>

As the economic recession spurred the need to cut deficit and debt, the defense budget became the primary target to make much needed savings. On this issue, like others which concerned Congress, the Pentagon was also rebuffed by a White House bent on scaling back defense spending. Although the Pentagon did not object in theory with the Budget Control Act which aimed to cut \$500 billion in the defense budget over 20 years, they thought that

---

<sup>751</sup> Ibid, 585-586

<sup>752</sup> Ibid, 588

<sup>753</sup> Ibid, 556

<sup>754</sup> Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The End Game: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (UK: Atlantic Books, 2012), 656-670

the sequester, which would make automatic across the board cuts, would have dire effects on national defense, the shape of the force and the U.S. ability to maintain alliances around the world.<sup>755</sup> Secretary of State Leon Panetta criticized what he considered a centralized management of the White House which prevented an informed debate on the defense budget by excluding the most concerned and knowledgeable about its matters, a practice he believes was telling of “a problem with President Obama’s use of his cabinet,” which is the most centralized in decision making than any other administration he worked for.<sup>756</sup>

## **2-2 The State of Emergency, Counterterrorism and War Powers**

Despite his promises to break with the unpopular policies of the Bush administration, Obama continued some practices that are symptomatic of an unbridled power of the presidency. From the continuation of the state of emergency, to the burgeoning use of drones and the use of military force without congressional authorization, President Obama showed no intention to relinquish his presidential prerogatives to dictate foreign policy choices. From his first year in office, President Obama extended the state of national emergency initiated by his predecessor after the 9/11 events every year until he left office.<sup>757</sup> In a message to Congress he confirmed that “the terrorist threat that led to the declaration on September 14, 2001, of a national emergency continues,” explaining that he has “determined” this to be “necessary.”<sup>758</sup> Although Congress is constitutionally entitled to meet every six months to decide whether to repeal such state of emergency, it has become almost a tradition not to do so.<sup>759</sup>

While Obama departed from some of the counterterrorism practices adopted by his predecessor, he continued the application of some and the escalation of others. His administration was effective to put an end to interrogations and CIA black sites, though the previous administration began already to break with such practices, but military trials, detentions, secrecy and surveillance continued to characterize an extended period of a “new normal.”<sup>760</sup> A common and controversial practice that the two administrations share was the use of drones and targeted killing, albeit Obama took such practice to an unprecedented level.

---

<sup>755</sup> Panetta and Newton, *Worthy Fights*

<sup>756</sup> Ibid

<sup>757</sup> Gregory Korte, “Obama Extends post-9/11 state of national emergency,” *USA Today*, 9 September 2019, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/09/09/obama-extends-post-911-state-national-emergency-16th-year/90004960/>

<sup>758</sup> Ibid

<sup>759</sup> Ibid

<sup>760</sup> Jack Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint: The Accountable Presidency after 9/11* (U.S: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 20

The Obama administration authorized 563 airstrikes, of which mostly were with drones, far less than the 57 airstrikes authorized by the Bush administration.<sup>761</sup> Those strikes were outside war zones including Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan while strikes in Afghanistan mounted to 1071 in 2016 only.<sup>762</sup>

While some consider the surge in drones use as a continuation of the Bush national security policy, others see it as a way for Obama to break with the Bush legacy by pursuing more discrete and less controversial options than ground invasions while keeping the same broad objective to root out threats to the U.S security.<sup>763</sup> Drones help also preserve the President's prerogatives in the use of force and send the political message that although the U.S. is scaling back its presence from the Middle East, it is still committed to protect American interests in the region.<sup>764</sup> Unable to radically break with the Bush legacy in national security, Obama changed only the semantics of Bush's policy and adopted less controversial practices; he renamed the "war on terror" as "countering violent extremism" and substituted infamous practices like torture and large scale military operations with airstrikes.<sup>765</sup>

Despite the controversies raised by targeted killing and the harm they inflict on civilians, the Obama administration continued to justify the legality of this practice. In a report published in December 2016 on the legal and policy frameworks of U.S. national security operations, the White House claimed that its practices of targeting were not only in line with laws governing armed conflicts, but they also follow measures of safety that exceed those required by law.<sup>766</sup> The tools the U.S. rely on to target the leadership of enemy combatants are technologically-driven and have "the ability to monitor targets for extended periods of time [and] can allow the United States to distinguish more effectively between a member of the enemy forces and a civilian."<sup>767</sup> In a white paper prepared by the Department of Justice in early 2013 the president was spared the burden of judicial oversight. The paper claims that the president should manage drone operations unilaterally because he was more qualified

---

<sup>761</sup>Purkiss, Jessica and Jack Serle, "Obama's covert drone war in numbers: ten times more strikes than Bus," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, <https://v1.thebureauinvestigates.com/2017/01/17/obamas-covert-drone-war-numbers-ten-times-strikes-bush/>

<sup>762</sup> Ibid

<sup>763</sup> Jordan Cash, "Attack of the Drones: National Security, Due Process, and the Constitutionality of Unmanned Strikes," in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley (New York: Routledge, 2018), p 128

<sup>764</sup> Ibid

<sup>765</sup>Karen A. Feste, "Terrorism Strategy Shifts from Bush to Obama," in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley. (New York: Routledge, 2018), p68

<sup>766</sup> "Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States' Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations," *White House*, December 2016, 20, <https://fas.org/man/eprint/frameworks.pdf>

<sup>767</sup> Ibid

with the means and the bureaucracy at hand to decide the viability of resorting to such force. The paper further argues that judicial implication to decide the legality of this force would “require the Court to supervise inherently predictive judgments by the president and his national security advisers,” an action that is beyond the reach and authority of the judiciary.<sup>768</sup>

On the direct use of military force, President Obama did not break with the rule of the executive’s unilateralism and even expanded the scope and duration of previous congressional authorizations to go to war. The military operation against Libya and the campaign against ISIL stand as two cases in point. In March 2011 the U.S. took part in a NATO-led military operation against Libya under a UN Security Council resolution passed in response to a military conflict in the country. Although the operation lasted more than the 60 days limit set by the War Powers Resolution, the President never requested an authorization from Congress. Even before the start of the operation the Department of Justice’s Office of Legal Counsel advised that the President could order the use of military force in Libya without prior congressional approval because he had the constitutional authority as a Commander in Chief and as Chief Executive to do so.<sup>769</sup> This view is backed by the Office views in many past similar instances and by more than two centuries of presidential practice. Beside “the vast share of responsibility for the conduct of foreign relations” vested in the executive by the U.S. Constitution, American history “is replete of instances of presidential uses of military force abroad in the absence of prior congressional approval,” a practice that has “only multiplied” and “engaged in by presidents of both parties.”<sup>770</sup>

Even as the military operation passed the 90 days limit set by the War Powers Resolution after which the president should end the use of force, the White House continued to uphold the legality of the unilateral military action. In a correspondence to the Speaker of the House John Boehner in June 2011, the Obama administration explained that the President had the authority as a Commander in Chief to direct the military operation against Libya because of the American interests involved there and the “limited nature, scope and duration of the anticipated actions” of the operation.<sup>771</sup> Operation Odyssey Dawn, according to the

---

<sup>768</sup> Jordan Cash, *Attack of the Drones*, 131

<sup>769</sup> Caroline D. Krass, “Authority to Use Military Force in Libya,” *Office of Legal Counsel*, April 1, 2011, 5, [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/olc/opinions/2011/04/31/authority-military-use-in-libya\\_0.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/olc/opinions/2011/04/31/authority-military-use-in-libya_0.pdf)

<sup>770</sup> *Ibid*, p7

<sup>771</sup> Joseph E. Macmanus and Elizabeth L. King “United States Activities in Libya,” *US Department of State and US Department of Defense*, June, 15, 2011, <https://fas.org/man/eprint/wh-libya.pdf>

administration, does not amount to the “hostilities” purported by such resolution and which require congressional approval. In other words, this operation did not “involve sustained fighting or active exchanges of fire with hostile forces,” nor did it involve “the presence of U.S ground troops, U.S. casualties or a serious threat thereof, or any significant chance of escalation into a conflict.”<sup>772</sup>

In the military campaign against ISIS, the Obama administration not only relied on previous congressional authorizations, namely AUMF 2001 and AUMF 2002, but expanded the scope, duration and the targets approved by these legislations. In the process, the White House further sidelined any possible oversight from the other branches of the government. The White House explained that the AUMF 2001 provided the president with the congressional authority not only to retaliate for the 9/11 attacks but also “to prevent any future act of international terrorism against the United States” from nations, organizations, or individuals who planned and perpetrated the attacks and therefore such authorization continues beyond the Bush presidency “to provide the domestic legal authority for the United States to use military force” against ISIS.<sup>773</sup> This group also falls under the “associate groups” category which is defined by the Obama administration as any organized armed group that enters in alliance or partnership with the Taliban or el Qaida and engages in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners.<sup>774</sup> The constitutional scholar Louis Fisher contends that neither AUMF 2001 nor AUMF 2002 provides a legal basis for the U.S. military campaign because ISIS was not part of the “organizations” that committed the 9/11 attacks and AUMF 2002 authorized an offensive action against Iraq for its alleged possession of chemical weapons but was never meant to commit the U.S. for the protection of the country in the future.<sup>775</sup>

The war power Obama wielded over the legislative was also expanded over the judiciary, thus giving him the leeway to conduct foreign policy unchallenged. In May 2014 Captain Nathan Michael Smith sued the President for his decision to start military operations against ISIS without Congressional authorization. Although Smith did not oppose the operation in principle, he argued that the Constitution he promised to defend does not allow the President

---

<sup>772</sup> Ibid

<sup>773</sup> *Report on the Legal and Policy*, 3

<sup>774</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>775</sup> Louis Fisher, “Military Initiatives by President Obama,” in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, Richard S. Conley ed., (New York: Routledge, 2018), p 83



to go to war without a declaration of war from Congress.<sup>776</sup> In June 2016 the Justice Department requested the dismissal of the case arguing that the officer had no standing to advance the case, that there was no political dispute between the executive and the legislative over the legality on the war on ISIS and that Congress, by appropriating funds to support the war efforts implicitly approved the military operation.<sup>777</sup> Although Smith's attorneys refuted these claims, the court eventually dismissed the case and in effect ended the challenge to Obama's decision to go to war. The court judged that Smith suffered no evident harm that could support his standing and that the case was in the realm of international relations which represented a political question that is not within the court's capacity to decide.<sup>778</sup>

### **2-3 Presidential Unilateralism through Executive Actions**

Obama's unilateral presidential practice is also evident in the extensive use of presidential directives which does not require much congressional scrutiny. The most common of these are executive orders, memoranda, and proclamations. The difference between such directives is very subtle and has to do with form rather than substance. They are all used to manage officials and government departments, but executive orders are published regularly while memoranda and proclamations are made public only when the "President determines that they have 'general applicability and legal effect.'"<sup>779</sup> Although President Obama resorted to these mostly to affect progressive and domestic agenda, their frequent use is revealing of the president's control over policy making and his willingness to evade congressional constraints.

When the Democrats dominated Congress in Obama's first two years in office the president was generally at ease in getting his agenda implemented but he was later faced with Republicans resistant to legislative reforms on healthcare, immigration, and the environment. In an address to the public in 2011, Obama announced that he ordered his team to "keep looking every single day for actions we can take without Congress," noting that his administration would make use of "executive actions on a regular basis."<sup>780</sup> In 2014, what Obama called the "year of action," he announced that "I've got a pen, and I've got a phone.

---

<sup>776</sup> Ibid,88

<sup>777</sup> Ibid, 87

<sup>778</sup> Ibid, 89

<sup>779</sup> Vivian S Chu and Todd Garvey, "Executive Orders: Issuance, Modification, and Revocation," *CRS*, April 16, 2014, 2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS20846.pdf>

<sup>780</sup> Gregory Korte, "Obama's executive action rollouts increasing in pace," *USA Today*, April 22, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/04/22/obama-executive-actions-increasing/25828391/>

And that's all I need ..... because with a pen, I can take executive actions.”<sup>781</sup> While the number of executive orders signed by President Obama is close to his predecessors, the excessive use of memoranda is quite remarkable. When the executive orders are added to memoranda issued by the President up to 2014, Obama would top the list of presidents resorting to executive actions since the Truman presidency.<sup>782</sup> One reason for making use of memoranda more than executive orders is that the former don't correlate much with the excessive use of presidential power.<sup>783</sup> If considered separately, these executive actions would have marginal effect but they can be a potent instrument to affect incremental change like the agreement with China on emission reduction and the diplomatic opening with Cuba.<sup>784</sup>

While executive orders and memoranda are used mostly to affect domestic policy change, executive agreements have been instrumental for presidents to conduct foreign policy without much congressional oversight. These agreements are usually an alternative to treaties which require the consent of two thirds of the Senate. Thus, the number of treaties submitted to Congress for ratification is revealing of the president's willingness to cooperate with Congress or to avoid its potential intransigence. The limited use of treaties in the Obama presidency is one of its hallmarks. During his time in office, Obama submitted 38 treaties for ratification and the Senate approved only 15 of them making both the percentage of treaty submission and treaty approval the lowest since the Truman presidency.<sup>785</sup>

Another way by which presidents can conclude international agreements and freely conduct diplomacy without any congressional input comes in the form of political commitments. Unlike treaties and executive agreements, political commitments are not binding with regard to domestic and international law, they do not incur legal consequences for their abrogation and successive presidents have the power to disregard their obligations.<sup>786</sup> While the Iran nuclear deal is clearly a political commitment, it is unlike any other concluded by previous administrations. President Obama made “a significant constitutional innovation” because he

---

<sup>781</sup> Ibid

<sup>782</sup> Gregory Korte, “Obama Issues Executive Orders by another Name,” *USA Today*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2014/12/16/obama-presidential-memoranda-executive-orders/20191805/>

<sup>783</sup> Ibid

<sup>784</sup> Edward Ashbee and John Dumbrell, “Introduction: the Politics of Change,” in *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change*, ed. Edward Ashbee and John Dumbrell, (Switzerland:Palgrave Macmillan, 2017 ),21

<sup>785</sup> Curtis A. Bradley & Jack L. Goldsmith, “Presidential Control over International Law,” *Harvard Law Review*13,no. 5 (March 2018): 1211

<sup>786</sup> Ibid,1218

“married international political commitments with preexisting statutory delegations to forge deep international cooperation without the approval or even involvement of Congress.”<sup>787</sup> While it was not in the president’s power to completely eliminate sanctions on Iran, he made use of existing statutes related to these sanctions that made freezing these sanctions for a while possible.<sup>788</sup> President Obama was well-aware of the nonbinding nature of the Iran nuclear deal but he “took a bet either that Hillary Clinton would win the election or that the unwinding of sanctions for three years would make any re-imposition of sanctions too painful politically.”<sup>789</sup> President Obama resorted to these commitments even at his own peril because of their “efficiency and predictability in completing international agreements” and because a deal like the one with Iran has a consequential and multilateral nature that was likely to induce much opposition from a Republican-controlled Congress.<sup>790</sup>

Apart from presidential unilateralism as a hallmark of the Obama presidency, the gulf between the views and promises advanced by Obama the candidate and the practices of Obama the president is of much significance. Before his election Obama was a forthright critic of the “imperial presidency” and the lack of interbranch collaboration in the U.S. government but once in office he followed the same trajectory of a Chief Executive exercising unchecked power in the realm of foreign policy. What encouraged a more assertive presidency in Obama’s years in office was the congressional deference of its constitutional power to the Commander in Chief.

---

<sup>787</sup> Ibid, 1219

<sup>788</sup>Jeffrey S. Peake, “Obama, Unilateral Diplomacy and Iran: Treaties, Executive Agreements, and Political Commitments,” in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley. (New York:Routledge, 2018),161

<sup>789</sup> Jack Goldsmith, “A Sorry Bargain: Weak from the start, the Iran nuclear deal was a fragile political commitment that left Congress out in the cold,” *Hoover Digest*, Sept. 22, 2018,

<https://www.hoover.org/research/sorry-bargain>

<sup>790</sup>Peake, *Obama, Unilateral Diplomacy*, 144

### **3- Congress's Limited Role and Lax Oversight**

As the president continued to dominate foreign policy making, Congress maintained the practice of deferring its power in this realm to the executive resulting in an increasingly lax oversight in the conduct of international affairs. Congress's marginal role was markedly evident in the conclusion of international agreements and in the use of U.S. military force on multiple fronts overseas. While concurrence with the president was common among ordinary members of Congress, this was more manifest among congressional leadership across the political spectrum.

#### **3-1 Executive Agreements and Limited Wars**

One area that has seen an increasing power of the executive and the waning role of the legislative is the making of international agreements. A major reason for this trend is not only the active role of the executive, but the inaction of Congress because "much presidential control over international law is the result of broad delegations of authority from Congress and accretions of executive branch practice."<sup>791</sup> This has become more evident with Congress's increasing focus to scrutinize presidential practice in other areas of foreign policy making and the subordination of oversight over international law, partly "because Congress has never focused on the overall picture."<sup>792</sup>

Although executive agreements do not require the same congressional scrutiny evident in international treaties, Presidents have been adept in concluding them unilaterally without triggering constitutional contentions. One way to avoid the involvement of Congress is to rely on ex ante executive agreements which, unlike ex post executive agreement, do not require much input from Congress because their negotiation and conclusion are already delegated to the president by the legislative.<sup>793</sup> With regard to the Obama presidency, "Congress has delegated extraordinarily broad domestic authority to the President that the Obama Administration figured out how to use in ways that helped to implement political commitments."<sup>794</sup>

Although the Iran nuclear deal was a political commitment that did not require congressional approval, and despite a fierce opposition from Republicans, AIPAC, Israel and most U.S.

---

<sup>791</sup> Bradley and Goldsmith, *Presidential Control*, 1206

<sup>792</sup> Ibid, 1211

<sup>793</sup> Ibid, 1212

<sup>794</sup> Ibid, 1270

Gulf allies to the deal, the Obama administration succeeded in marshalling the needed support for the deal in Congress. The team responsible for communicating the merits of the deal set what they called the “Antiwar Room” to marshal support for the deal.<sup>795</sup> These efforts culminated in garnering the support of twenty-nine prominent physicists, European ambassadors, former national security officials, retired Israeli generals, more than three hundred rabbis and even Iranian dissidents and human right activists.<sup>796</sup> When the deal was about to face a scrutiny in Congress, the team in the Antiwar Room “logged more than twelve hundred engagements with members of Congress.” Obama himself made more than thirty calls to members in Congress while in vacation to secure their support. Eventually, a support of forty two members in the senate was enough to save the deal from a Congressional rejection.<sup>797</sup>

Legislative-executive concurrence in foreign policy making was more evident in matters of war despite some congressional opposition that did not amount to a level capable to affect remarkable change. In this context, presidents engage in wars either by an official declaration from Congress as the Constitution stipulates, which is very rare throughout American history, by getting involved in conflicts and seeking a simple congressional approval afterwards, or acting unilaterally without any deliberation with Congress. The latter instance has become the most frequent model of war power making.<sup>798</sup> To evade congressional oversight, presidents define the U.S. involvement in conflicts abroad under the guise of defensive actions needed to protect American lives and troops.<sup>799</sup> But such pretext has entailed more than defense and expanded to involve military actions against real, imminent and even possible threats against not only Americans but also largely defined American interests. As the United States grew in power, influence and actual presence overseas, world events whenever they occur become a possible pretext to invoke war powers of the presidency.<sup>800</sup>

Presidential use of military force without prior congressional approval or with limited deliberations with Congress is not only the result of the president’s exercise of his prerogatives, but because of Congress’ deference of its power to the Commander in Chief. During Obama’s two terms in office, Congress was either acquiescent or its opposition did

---

<sup>795</sup> Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: Inside the Obama White House* (London: The Bodley Head, 2018), p 332

<sup>796</sup> Ibid

<sup>797</sup> Ibid, 332-333

<sup>798</sup> Randall Smith, “Presidents in War and Diplomacy” in *Vital Statistics on the Presidency*, ed. Bert A. Rockman, Andrew Rudalevige & Colin Campbell (Washington: CQ Press, 2014), 3

<sup>799</sup> Ibid

<sup>800</sup> Ibid

not materialize in policy change in at least four occasions involving the use of military force. Obama Afghanistan policy, especially the two phases of the surge, was implemented with limited involvement of Congress and with little opposition from its members. The addition of more than 20000 troops in the first half of 2009 received a bipartisan support that was evident in the bills proposed by congressional leaders from both parties and ratified by Congress to finance the war effort. From 428 House members only 60 Democrats rejected the administration's proposal while it received a unanimous support in the Senate.<sup>801</sup> The anti-war block in Congress, which lobbied ardently to oppose the Iraq war, showed far less opposition to Obama's escalation of military operations in Afghanistan.<sup>802</sup> The second phase of the surge in Afghanistan which involved sending more than 37000 troops was also carried out with little consultation with Congress. Such operation received the blessing of key congressional leaders from the opposition party who advocated for more military escalation.<sup>803</sup>

In Operation Odyssey Dawn which was carried without any congressional authorization, Congress's input was not only marginal but also supportive, especially from senior party members even from the opposition. In the letter to Congress defending the legality of the presidential unilateral use of force in Libya, the Obama White House expressed gratitude to congressional leaders like McCain, Kerry, Lieberman, Levin, Feinstein, Graham, and Chambliss for their support through resolutions which represent "a commitment to supporting the aspirations of the Libyan people for political reform and self-government."<sup>804</sup> Leaders across the political spectrum in both chambers of the legislative "generally discouraged, co-opted, or simply opposed" the proposed bills that aimed to challenge the president's policy choices and "worked to keep Congress's constitutional and political responsibility for the strikes limited and tertiary."<sup>805</sup> Although opposition in the House to the operation was marked and bipartisan, it was not strong enough to deprive the president from conducting the military strikes on Libya, especially through the approval of funding needed for the operation.<sup>806</sup>

---

<sup>801</sup> Ryan C. Hendrickson, *Obama at War: Congress and the Imperial Presidency* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015),28

<sup>802</sup>Ibid

<sup>803</sup> Ibid, p 29

<sup>804</sup>Macmanus and King, *United States Activities in Libya*

<sup>805</sup>Hendrickson, *Obama at War*, 56

<sup>806</sup> Ibid,61

In the military campaign in Iraq and Syria against the group known as ISIS Congress was not entirely passive to the White House unilateral use of force but its efforts to replace or repeal AUMF 2001 and AUMF 2002 by which the Obama administration justified its military operation did not come to fruition. Before the official announcement of the U.S. campaign to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State, the President notified congress seven times about the deployment of U.S. troops to Iraq and the conduct of airstrikes against the group. In all these instances the president did not rely on any formal declaration of war or authorization from Congress. Instead, he relied on the routinely cited constitutional authority of the president as a Commander in Chief and as Head of the Executive.<sup>807</sup> In the campaign announced by the Obama administration, the White House continued to rely on the congressional authorizations introduced in 2001 and 2002 to fight al Qaeda and wage a war on Iraq respectively. In using the 2001 authorization the White House advanced the argument that the new group was in continuous communication with el Qaeda and is but the development of this organization in Iraq.<sup>808</sup> The 2002 authorization was interpreted as not only to stem threats emanating from Iraq against the United States but also against the Iraqi government.<sup>809</sup>

Some members’ dissatisfaction with the White House policy put forward a number of legislative proposals to challenge the president but none of them materialized into law. After the first deployment of American troops to Iraq in June 2014 and before the start of the campaign to “degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State,” Congress considered proposals that aimed to outlaw the use of funds appropriated to the Pentagon pursuant to the 2001 AUMF and 2002 AUMF; both proposals were defeated in a vote.<sup>810</sup> Because President Obama notified Congress about the deployment of U.S. troops to Iraq pursuant to the WPR, another proposal was also put forward in July of the same year with the objective to trigger the 60 days clock setting a date to withdraw these troops or seek a new congressional authorization. Although the language of this proposed resolution was watered down and passed the House with 370-40, it was never introduced to the Senate for consideration or ratification.<sup>811</sup> When airstrikes began in Iraq in August 2014 another proposal was put forward which aimed not to halt the military operations pursuant to the WPR but to introduce

---

<sup>807</sup> “The War Powers Resolution: Concepts and Practice,” *CRS*, March 8, 2019,

43<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42699.pdf>

<sup>808</sup> *Ibid*, 48-49

<sup>809</sup> *Ibid*, 49

<sup>810</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>811</sup> *Ibid*

a new AUMF that would repeal the 2001 and 2002 ones. To avoid the broad interpretations of this new authorization, these proposals set limits on the timing, geographical locations, the military targets and the type of military force used, namely the exclusion of deploying large troops in the region. Like other proposals, this proposal was considered by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee but was never put for a vote in the Senate. Other proposals that aimed specifically to abrogate or put a time limit on the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs were also introduced but were never ratified or came into laws.<sup>812</sup>

The Obama administration assumed further authority in war making by asserting that Congress had approved the campaign in indirect ways that supported the president's choice to use military force without new congressional authorization. In a report explaining the legal framework of its use of military force, the administration argued that Congress continued to approve the president's request to finance the war efforts "through an unbroken stream of appropriations over multiple years" and "in line with the specific amounts and categories requested by the president."<sup>813</sup> Along with these funds, Congress also gave the green light of providing groups fighting ISIL in Iraq and Syria with the needed lethal and nonlethal support.<sup>814</sup> Such appropriation of funds and the approval of aid to armed groups in the region "convey Congress's support for the President's use of force against ISIL, including his determination that he had and continues to have authority to act under prior congressional authorizations for the use of military force"<sup>815</sup>

None of the matters that involved the use of military force and could receive less congressional scrutiny like the use of drones. The unchecked use of drones was not as much the outcome of a burgeoning presidency as it was the consequence of a passive Congress. The decision to use this lethal force and to "keep the very fact of drone killings classified, deliberately invoking the state-secrets privilege in a way guaranteed to stymie oversight, public debate, and legal accountability" was purely the president's choice and was therefore under his power to alter or control.<sup>816</sup> The President himself was not loathe to acknowledge his discomfort with the power he had at hands to initiate and carry on a covert drone program

---

<sup>812</sup> Ibid

<sup>813</sup> *Report on the Legal and Policy*, 6

<sup>814</sup> Ibid

<sup>815</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>816</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, "Obama's Weak Defense of His Record on Drone Killings," *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/president-obamas-weak-defense-of-his-record-on-drone-strikes/511454/>



“without Congress showing much interest in restraining actions with authorizations that were written really broadly” and “without accountability or domestic debate.”<sup>817</sup>

Congress showed little opposition to the multitude or the manner in which such strikes were operating, especially from senior leaders in both parties. Congressional staffers in the intelligence committees of both houses reported their knowledge of these strikes but they expressed little to no opposition. Although these intelligence committees held hearings on these drone strikes, most of these hearings were private and classified.<sup>818</sup> Even when domestic and international pressure mounted on the Obama administration to be more transparent in its drone program and even when official requests were logged by chairs of the Senate Intelligence Committee and the Armed Services Committee, President Obama continued the same practice of secrecy in managing drone operations.<sup>819</sup>

Congress’s activism to oversee the White House response to the Syrian crisis, especially the possibility of using force against the Syrian regime, engendered an impression that the president’s hands were tied to act freely in the matter. In reality, however, Congress at times was more supportive for a military response to the crisis than the president, with hawkish Republicans advocating a more assertive response from what they deemed an indecisive President. While the letter bearing the signatures of 98 Republicans and 18 Democrats from the House urged the president to consult with Congress and seek authorization before using force in Syria after the alleged use of chemical weapons, these members expressed readiness to convene at the President’s request if he sees a military action necessary to “share the burden of decisions made regarding U.S. involvement in the quickly escalating Syrian conflict.”<sup>820</sup> What is also remarkable in the letter is the absence of signatures from House leaders of both parties.<sup>821</sup> Republican leaders like Senator John McCain, Senator Lindsey Graham, ranking minority member in the House Eliot Engel and House Armed Services Committee chair Buck McKeon expressed support for a military action.<sup>822</sup> Even after the president announced his intention to seek congressional authorization, House Republican leaders like Speaker Boehner, majority leader Cantor and House Democratic Party leaders

---

<sup>817</sup> Ibid

<sup>818</sup> Hendrickson, *Obama at War*, 35

<sup>819</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>820</sup> Matt Fuller, “116 House Member Sign Syria Letter to Obama (updated),” *Roll Call*, August 28, 2013, <https://www.rollcall.com/2013/08/28/116-house-members-sign-syria-letter-to-obama-updated/>

<sup>821</sup> Ibid.

<sup>822</sup> Hendrickson, *Obama at War*, 120

Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer, and Xavier Becerra signaled their support for the use of military force.<sup>823</sup>

Despite the President's change of direction to seek Congressional authorization for a possible use of military force in Syria, he still asserted his authority as a Commander in Chief to use force without congressional approval noting that sharing the burden with Congress would only prove that "America acts more effectively when we stand together."<sup>824</sup> More importantly, any outcome regarding a possible vote in Congress to authorize a military strike would be in the President's advantage. Although the argument that going to war without Congressional authorization would provide Republicans a pretext to bring the President to account, a Congressional authorization, as Ben Rhodes argued, would give the President more "ownership over Syria" and would raise "the expectations around the world about what we were prepared to do and what we could achieve."<sup>825</sup> The President seemed even satisfied with Congress rejecting authorization because it "would potentially end the cycle of American wars of regime change in the Middle East."<sup>826</sup> What later proved the limits of Congress's opposition of a military action and the broad power Obama had was Trump's authorization of airstrikes against Syrian military targets without seeking Congressional authorization and without concrete opposition even from the most ardent opponents of the Trump administration.

### **3-2 The Limits of the War Powers Resolution**

The War Powers Resolution, which was passed in 1973 to limit the President's use of military force without congressional authorization, did little to curb the Obama administration's use of force unilaterally, following the same historical trend set by successive presidencies. While reporting to Congress on the use of military force has been observed by Presidents, triggering the 60 days limit by which hostilities should either stop or get approved by Congress has been very rare. The lax application of this resolution has not only been the outcome of Presidents' exercising their prerogatives or presenting their own interpretations of its statutes, but also because of Congress's willingness to defer its own prerogatives to the Commander in Chief. Randall D. Smith noted that "although the War Powers Resolution looks good on paper, every president since Gerald Ford has steadfastly denied its constitutionality" while "the Supreme Court has equally consistently refused to

---

<sup>823</sup> Ibid,121

<sup>824</sup> *Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria*

<sup>825</sup> Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 236

<sup>826</sup> Ibid,240

rule on the matter.”<sup>827</sup> Even when the White House chose to comply with the 60 days requirement set by the resolution, they did so only conveniently. The Congressional Research Service reported that “From 1975 through March 2017, Presidents have submitted 168 reports as the result of the War Powers Resolution, but only one, the 1975 Mayaguez seizure, cited Section 4(a) (1), which triggers the 60-day withdrawal requirement,” but doing so was inconsequential as “the military action was completed and U.S. Armed Forces had disengaged from the area of conflict when the report was made”<sup>828</sup>

The Obama administration played on the semantics of the resolution to provide a legal basis for the use of force without inviting constitutional controversies. The Office of Legal Counsel suggests that the resolution does not restrict the President’s war power making but rather “recognizes and presupposes the existence of unilateral presidential authority to deploy armed forces” in international events where hostilities are either imminent or present. The Office further explains that one clear limitation on the president’s ability to use force overseas without prior congressional authorization is when this force is used to wage a ‘war’ in the sense the framers of the constitution meant in the Declaration of War Clause. Moreover, the pattern of military actions taken without Congressional authorization throughout American history “precludes any suggestion that Congress’s authority to declare war covers every military engagement, however limited, that the President initiates.” In other words, not every military action can be constitutionally classified as a ‘war’ unless “fact-specific assessment” is applied in terms of “anticipated nature, scope and duration.” Such criteria are only met in “prolonged and substantial military engagements, typically involving exposure of U.S. military personnel to significant risk over a substantial period.” Examples of these, according to the Office, include the Vietnam war and the Korean War, but not the deployment of 20000 troops in Haiti in 1994 or in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995.<sup>829</sup> Because in the operation in Libya the U.S. role was limited to airstrikes and the support of partner forces, and as the operation did not involve the deployment of U.S. forces, such use of force does not amount to war in the constitutional sense and therefore does not require congressional approval.<sup>830</sup>

The use of drones seemed to lend itself more conveniently to the broad interpretations of the resolution by the White House which made a congressional oversight more problematic even

---

<sup>827</sup> Randall, *Presidents in War*, 11

<sup>828</sup> *The War Powers Resolution*

<sup>829</sup> Krass, *Authority to Use Military*, 8

<sup>830</sup> *Ibid*, 13

when deliberately entreated. Drones are usually operated from places far away from their targets, which makes the possibility of direct military engagement of U.S. troops with their adversaries or the occurrence of ‘hostilities’ very unlikely. The time limit set by the WPR is not applicable to the employment of drones because their operation is not usually limited in duration. In consequence, “the argument could be made that in these circumstances, the War Powers Resolution, as currently drafted, does not require the President to obtain statutory congressional approval for the use of UAVs in military operations abroad.”<sup>831</sup>

Evading congressional oversight has also been possible by expanding the scope of military operations from that set at their initiation. A case in point is the deployment of American forces under Title 10 of the U.S. code which stipulates that the purpose of force deployment is limited to the support and training of partner forces, but when ‘hostilities’ emanate Congress has little influence on probing the legality of the decision.<sup>832</sup> In February 2013, President Obama reported to Congress the deployment of U.S. forces to Niger and Sahel region under his power as a Commander in Chief and for the purpose of supporting French forces for gathering and sharing intelligence. When deaths and casualties were reported in October 2017, some members of Congress expressed concerns that the legislative was not properly informed about the scope of the mission and the legal basis under which these forces were operating. As the mission of these forces expanded, the Trump administration resorted to 2001 AUMF as a legal justification, a move that further expanded the interpretation of such authorization and marginalized Congress in war making.<sup>833</sup>

Even when the use of force is not legally justified by the White House and some legislative oversight is required, Congress did little to exercise its power to check the power of the president. Before the official start of the military campaign against ISIS, the Obama administration notified Congress about 8 instances of a military responses to what is known as the ISIS crisis in Iraq and Syria from June 16, 2014 to September 8, 2014. In all the reports, the President did not cite any declaration of war or legal authorization to use force but relied on his constitutional authority as a Commander in Chief. While the deployment of troops in these instances meant to protect U.S. personnel in the Iraq mission and thus might not have involved ‘hostilities,’ the conduct of airstrikes would, however, require the president to stop operations within 60. What happened was that “neither the President nor Congress

---

<sup>831</sup>*The War Powers Resolution*

<sup>832</sup> *Ibid*, 52

<sup>833</sup> *Ibid*,53-54

took any action to definitely characterize such actions as triggering the WPR withdrawal requirement.”<sup>834</sup>

Presidential and constitutional scholars offer different explanations for the Obama administration exercising much influence on foreign policy making despite Obama’s promise to foster more interbranch cooperation. For one thing, President Obama did have much power at hand to influence the direction of American foreign policy in his own image, but Congress’s support or deference to the presidency is also of much significance. At the start of his presidency, Obama presided over an “imperial presidency” with much control that is not easy to relinquish. Jack Goldsmith contends that “war and emergency inevitably shift power to the presidency” and “permanent war and permanent emergency threaten to make the shift permanent.”<sup>835</sup> The thesis that new presidents would inevitably rely on legal policy frameworks set by their predecessors to conduct foreign policy without much congressional oversight has only proved accurate by the Obama presidency.

But president Obama was aided by more than an imperial institution as Congress at the beginning of his first term was in accordance with much of his agenda and vision. Partisan politics, or ‘partisan unity,’ from Truman to Clinton, has always been the defining factor of an aggressive presidency. That is, whenever the president’s party controls Congress the president has the leeway to conduct foreign policy the way he sees it fit.<sup>836</sup> Obama was elected not only against a background of financial crisis and uncertainty but also partisan realignment, notably the comeback of the Democrats to dominate elections.<sup>837</sup> President Obama and his party were the beneficiaries of public dissatisfaction with their rivals. Democratic dominance of political life was also the result of changes in the demography of the American electorate and its alignment, namely the increasing influence of minorities, highly educated individuals and professionals.<sup>838</sup>

More importantly, the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress (January 2009-January 2011) which was dominated by the President’s party was largely supportive of the President’s agenda for several reasons. Firstly, Democrats not only controlled the majority in both houses but were also ideologically homogenous and enjoyed a party unity not usually seen in previous congresses. The president

---

<sup>834</sup>Ibid, 44

<sup>835</sup> Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint*

<sup>836</sup> William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse, “When Congress Stops Wars: Partisan Politics and Presidential Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2007): 96

<sup>837</sup> Ashbee and Dumbrell, *Introduction: the Politics of Change*, 33

<sup>838</sup> Ibid

and his party members were also campaigning and working on a similar political agenda, a unity that was further reinforced by the financial crisis. Supporting the president's agenda was key to policy change to nurture a sense of accomplishment that was hampered by past electoral failures or an intransigent Republican President. As the public was eager to see profound political and especially economic change, the consequences of not meeting these expectations were politically costly.<sup>839</sup>

Even when controlled by the opposition party, Congress continued the historical practice of deferring its constitutional power to the President. When Obama was leading the military campaign in Iraq and Syria in September 2014 Republican minority whip senator John Cornyn criticized Congress, and specially the Senate, for the steep decline in its popularity and described the institution as “dysfunctional” and its members as “showboats” whose primary concern is elections and not dealing with the challenges that face the country.<sup>840</sup> Such state of affairs is nothing new but has become increasingly the norm in recent decades. Republicans controlling Congress in Bush's second term acted “as field lieutenants in the President's army rather than as members of an independent branch of government,” a condition that many Congressmen relate to the lack of “a strong institutional identity.”<sup>841</sup>

Such marginal role of Congress does not preclude the influence of its members in foreign policy making, but it makes inevitable a decisive role of the Head of the Executive in making and directing international relations of the state. Obama's leadership style has only confirmed the old conviction held by transformational American Presidents that the executive is inevitably the center of gravity in international affairs of the state. Thomas Jefferson once noted that “the management of foreign affairs is executive altogether,” and more than a century and a half later President Truman asserted: “I make foreign policy.”<sup>842</sup> Apart from the role played by the U.S. position in the international system and the international environment in directing American foreign policy, understanding how President Obama perceived these

---

<sup>839</sup> Barbara Sinclair, “Doing Big Things: Obama and the 111th Congress,” in *The Obama Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects*, ed. Bert A. Rockman, Andrew Rudalevige & Colin Campbell (Washington: CQ Press, 2012), p 5

<sup>840</sup> Jackie Wang, “Sen. John Cornyn criticizes 'dysfunctional' Congress, Obama's foreign policy,” UWIRE Text, 20 Sept. 2014, 1, *Gale Academic Onefile*, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A383059200/AONE?u=ed\\_itw&sid=AONE&xid=cc7d833d](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A383059200/AONE?u=ed_itw&sid=AONE&xid=cc7d833d).

<sup>841</sup> Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, “When Congress Checks Out,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 6 (November/December 2006): 79

<sup>842</sup> Thomas Jefferson and Harry Truman quoted in Eugene R. Wittkopt, Christopher M. Jones with Charles W. Kegley, Jr. *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process* (USA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 491

variables is indispensable to a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the sources of his Middle East policy.

#### **4- Obama's Perceptions, Foreign Policy Implications and Retrenchment**

As President Obama presided over an imperial presidency and continued to dominate the direction of American foreign policy with little challenge from a passive Congress, the President's perceptions of American power, of the Middle East and its dynamics and the role of the United States in the region would provide much rigor to explain his preferred course of retrenchment. The first African president was not only mindful of the limits of American power and what it can do in the Middle East, a region he believes is divided on ideological lines, but also of the view that America should lead by example.

##### **4-1 Obama's Perception of American Power**

Obama's perception of American power, and more importantly its limitations, is central to understanding his foreign policy choices. The President's resistance to be "a doctrine" president stems essentially from his belief that foreign policy decisions should not be based on a coherent and a well-defined doctrine but "have to be made based on an understanding of our power and our limits and an understanding of history."<sup>843</sup> That said, Obama believes that as long as the United States is mindful of what its power can do, it can be "a force of good," and setting objectives based on, and driven by, ideological considerations would only lead American "to be in for rude awakenings- as in Iraq"<sup>844</sup> In his last year in office, Obama continued to adhere to the same thinking of a non-doctrine president whose foreign policy "has been to be very *practical* in thinking about how do we advance U.S. interests."<sup>845</sup>

As a starting point, Obama does believe in the widely held view that American power, in terms of material resources, is diminishing which put limits on what the country has been able to do abroad, especially through military deployments. The combination a financial crisis, a rising debt and a growing deficit left little room for ambitious military engagements on the scale of Vietnam or Iraq. In an Interview with Chuck Todd of NBC in September 2014, Obama made clear that the United States could not go full force in Iraq and Syria because "We don't have the resources. It puts enormous strains on our military." As an alternative to costly policy choices, Obama suggested that regional partners like Saudi

---

<sup>843</sup> Richard Wolffe, "America Can Be A Force [For] Good In The World" *Newsweek*, April 21, 2008, [https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/apps/doc/A177841302/AONE?u=ed\\_itw&sid=AONE&xid=df60b016](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/apps/doc/A177841302/AONE?u=ed_itw&sid=AONE&xid=df60b016).

<sup>844</sup> Ibid

<sup>845</sup> Barack Obama, "Interview with Charlie Rose." *The American Presidency Project*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-0>

Arabia, Jordan, the UAE and Turkey should “get involved” because it is “their neighborhood” and they are more directly threatened than the US by these conflicts.<sup>846</sup> In this context, Obama holds a different view on the source of American decline. While the US foreign policy establishment contend that the retrenchment approach President Obama pursued in the ME is a recipe for American decline, he believes that an overextended United States in the region would not only drain its resources but would also weaken its ability to exploit more rewarding opportunities in other regions and would constrain the country in dealing with challenges that directly threaten American interests.<sup>847</sup> While he does not wholeheartedly embrace the declinist view, Obama admits that the United States is not the superpower that could lift all the misery in the world and, thanks to the interdependent nature of the international system, “America cannot meet the threats of this century alone,” and “the world cannot meet them without America.”<sup>848</sup>

Obama’s insistence on the efficacy of the international order that the United States helped create and sustain for more than half a century is not only an admission of, and a way to mitigate, relative decline, but also to maintain the country’s global leadership with minimum costs and limited resources. It is ironic that after decades of the use of force by the United States, sometimes unilaterally, to impose a Western-led order, Obama warned those who argue that the present international system is incompatible with today’s world and its challenges are actually calling for “a return to the rules that applied for most of human history” which centers on “the belief that power is a zero-sum game, that might makes right [and] that strong states must impose their will on weaker ones.”<sup>849</sup> In this sense, Obama appeals to the idea that the world is an integrated place, that all nations have common interests, that the use of force should be relegated as an instrument of foreign policy, and more importantly a strong and preponderant United States is in the interest of everyone.<sup>850</sup>

While Obama’s belief in the America’s relative decline in terms of diminishing resources and the country’s inability to individually attend to the liberal international order is evident, the

---

<sup>846</sup> Barack Obama “Interview with Chuck Todd of NBC News ‘Meet the Press’” *The American Presidency Project*, September 7, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-chuck-todd-nbc-news-meet-the-press-5>

<sup>847</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>848</sup> Barack Obama, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” *The American Presidency Project*, February 24, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-1>

<sup>849</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City,” *The American Presidency Project*, September 23, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-5>

<sup>850</sup> Ibid



President's understanding of the nature of American power and its limits is more subtle and profound. The sources of American power are more varied and diverse than the visible military force. While the strength of the US military is not an inaccurate yardstick to gauge American power, the ability and efficacy of this force to achieve foreign policy objectives is far more limited than what is widely held by most ordinary Americans and many policy makers. Other sources of American power, like a vibrant economy, a modern educational system, an innovative and cutting-edge scientific research and above all a dynamic and effective political system are far more consequential sources of power than military strength. Such sources of power are the best means to compete internationally with a rising China, to win friends and followers and to maintain a leadership role around the world.

#### **4-1-1 The Limits of Military Power in the Un-American Century**

Obama's sense of limits of US military power is not driven primarily by a decline in material sources but by his perception of what such power can possibly achieve. In defying the prescription of military force to solve every problem Obama believes he is defying the "Washington playbook" and the guiding principles of the foreign policy establishment. Unlike his approach to applying specific standers on events that warrant military response, the rules in the "Washington playbook" often prescribe the use of force as the antidote of international conflicts and crises. While this playbook is effective when "America is directly threatened" it can lead to "bad decisions" with regard to events like Syria.<sup>851</sup> What guides Obama against this thinking is the lessons he learnt from Iraq and Afghanistan where the US, despite the devotion of enormous resources over 13 years, could not "impose order" in a "still challenging environment."<sup>852</sup> Involving American troops in Syria while the US is still grappling with the consequences of its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would not only be a recipe for "big mistakes" but would also make the US "miss out on opportunities elsewhere in the world."<sup>853</sup>

Obama also views his critics as using misleading arguments to debunk his Syria policy. Obama argues that the use of force he announced after the "red line" he drew was crossed was never meant to "resolve" the war in Syria.<sup>854</sup> He believes that a profound change in the war in favor of US preferences can only be possible through deploying US troops on the

---

<sup>851</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>852</sup> Ibid

<sup>853</sup> Obama, *Interview with Charlie Rose*

<sup>854</sup> Ibid

scale of the Iraq war. The idea that any other limited military operation through missiles or airstrikes could have achieved this objective “is simply not borne out by any of the subsequent facts.”<sup>855</sup> Careful scrutiny of possible outcomes, whether meeting preset objectives or the emergence of unintended consequences, usually precludes Obama’s decision to use military force. The set of questions that Obama usually mulls over before embarking on any military action in places like Syria includes “can we make a difference in that situation? Would a military intervention have an impact? How would it affect our ability to support troops who are still in Afghanistan? What would be the aftermath of our involvement on the ground? Could it trigger even worse violence or the use of chemical weapons?” and more importantly “What offers the best prospect of a stable post-Assad regime?”<sup>856</sup>

In his memoir *The Audacity of Hope*, published a year before coming to office, Obama acknowledged a domestic source of a political culture that encourages military solutions to emerging problems abroad. The growing military muscle of the US at the beginning of the Cold War gave rise and strengthened what Obama calls the “iron triangle,” which includes “the Pentagon, defense contractors and congressmen with large defense expenditures in their districts,” a combination of forces that advocate military responses to international problems that are amenable to diplomatic solutions.<sup>857</sup> The narrative of military intervention in the United States is the product not only of past military encounters, namely that of Vietnam, but also the notion of US credibility and leadership. David Fitzgerald and David Ryan contend that Americans like to feel “strong, safe and good,” a desire that also guides their policy makers in using force which have translated into subsequent military interventions following the 9/11 attacks.<sup>858</sup>

Obama told Geoffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* that the popular belief in the efficacy of “playing tough” in foreign policy is part of a belief in Cold War “mythologies,” especially during the Reagan administration. “Reagan’s posture” as a president ready to use force did nothing to solve the Iran hostage crisis and his use of force in places like Grenada did little to advance the US “ability to shape world events.” Reagan’s apparent success was his ability to

---

<sup>855</sup> Ibid

<sup>856</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Franklin Foer and Chris Hughes,” January 26, 2013, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-interview-with-franklin-foer-and-chris-hughes>

<sup>857</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (UK: Canongate Books, 2008), 286

<sup>858</sup> David Fitzgerald and David Ryan, *Obama, US Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Intervention* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9

accurately perceive and exploit the diplomatic opening with the Soviet Union to negotiate the end of the Cold War. For Obama, it was diplomacy that finally brought the US to the nadir of its power and its unipolar moment.<sup>859</sup> Likewise, what Obama calls the “Nixon theory,” which is the surprising and overwhelming exercise of force against the enemy, did not prove right in Laos and Cambodia, but it subsequently shattered the basic foundations of governance, left a lasting impact on these countries to the present day, and did not serve American interests in any manner.<sup>860</sup>

Looking at the conduct of foreign policy from a realist lens, President Obama believes that understanding how others perceive their national interests and the extent to which they are ready to defend them through military force is central to making the right decision in matters of war and peace. States like Russia behave according to “their imperatives” and to what they see as not “important” to others.<sup>861</sup> Therefore, the US should not perceive force as the only solution to all problems and should “be very clear ahead of time about what is worth going to war for and what is not.” Using force in places perceived by others, namely Russia and China, as pertaining to their national interests would do little to change the behavior of these states. On the contrary, using force in such cases would be perceived by these states as an encroachment on their sovereignty and would in turn harm American credibility<sup>862</sup>

Part of the equation that should be fixed to resolve the overdependence on military force to conduct foreign policy is the inaccurate perception of threats and challenges and whether they lend themselves to military solutions. In a 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article, published as part of his presidential campaign, Obama called for the renewal of American leadership at a time when challenges are taking new forms and emanate from non-state armed groups, failed states and rising powers intent on challenging the liberal international order. Obama criticized the “conventional thinking” that drove Bush’s response to the 9/11 attacks; a response driven by the perception of “problems as state-based and principally amenable to military solutions.” Obama categorized such thinking as a “misguided view that led into a war in Iraq that never should have been authorized and never should have been waged.”<sup>863</sup> While Obama believes the notion that the US is engaged in a “clash of civilizations” to be “inaccurate” and is the product of “dogma and propaganda”, he admits that in the wake of 9/11 events the US treated

---

<sup>859</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>860</sup> Ibid

<sup>861</sup> Ibid

<sup>862</sup> Ibid

<sup>863</sup> Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership”, *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007)

the necessity to defend itself against “terrorism” and the need to deal with the cultural differences that exist with the Muslim world with the same military approach.<sup>864</sup>

Obama’s recurrent emphasis on the need to involve multilateral institutions like the United Nations to solve problems stems from his belief that in today’s world “power is much more diffuse, where threats that any state or peoples face can come from non-state actors and asymmetrical threats.”<sup>865</sup> In his commencement address at the US Military Academy in West Point in May 2014, Obama reiterated the same notion of diffused, unconventional threats and the need to devise unconventional strategies to deal with them. He noted that as el Qaida is decentralized and operates through affiliates in various countries, the US response should not involve “sending forces that stretch our military too thin or stir up local resentment,” characterizing the invasion of every country that give sanctuary to terrorists as “naïve and unsustainable.” Instead, the US should “empower” and work with local partners who would fight hand in hand with American forces.<sup>866</sup> The reliance on multilateral institutions, regional allies and local and forces to face diffused and non-state-based threats is a guiding principle of retrenchment.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Obama observed that the likelihood of direct confrontation between nuclear powers have become almost an impossibility, but threats emanating from groups, individuals and from failed states and internal violence have rendered the old “architecture” advanced by the West “buckling,” a condition that requires new understanding of “the notions of just war and the imperatives of just peace.”<sup>867</sup> Failed states and internal violence are essentially the product of political and economic choices, namely the failure to join an international liberal order. What Obama calls “those parts of the world on the margins of the global economy,” which are rife with corruption and governed by self-interested rulers, along with pandemics and climate change should be the primary source of concern to which the US strategy should adapt accordingly.<sup>868</sup>

---

<sup>864</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Mika Brzezinski of MSNBC’s ‘Morning Joe’, June 23, 2014, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-mika-brzezinski-msnbcs-morning-joe>

<sup>865</sup> Barack Obama, ‘Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of Bloomberg’s ‘View’ February 27, 2014, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-jeffrey-goldberg-bloombergs-view>

<sup>866</sup> Barack Obama, “Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York” *American Presidency Project*, May 28, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-the-united-states-military-academy-west-point-new-york-3>

<sup>867</sup> “Nobel Lecture by Barack H. Obama,” *The Nobel Prize*, December 10, 2009, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/obama/26183-nobel-lecture-2009/>

<sup>868</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 305-306

With the mismatch between the nature of threats and the policy tools adopted to deal with them, Obama worked towards an “internal balancing” strategy that aims to reform the US military to meet the threats of the new century and to revitalize the other, more efficient, sources of American power which would give the country a competitive edge over its adversaries in the long run. While the overwhelming strength of the US military power has been effective in deterring and dealing with state-based and conventional threats, it has equally undermined the significance and utility of other non-military instruments that are indispensable to deal with non-state-based and unconventional threats and challenges.

Obama contends that the US military remains by far the strongest relative to its rivals, but he also admits that the US Army and the Marine Corps “are facing a crisis.”<sup>869</sup> According to Pentagon officials, no army unit is “fully ready to respond in the event of a new crisis or emergency beyond Iraq” and such deficiency must be overcome by modernizing the army to meet “the missions of the future.”<sup>870</sup> To do this, defense programs should be “reevaluated in light of current needs, gaps in the field, and likely future threat scenarios.” The use of force is plausible beyond the cause of self-defense and when such possibility emerges, the US should avoid acting alone but strive to marshal the support of others following the 1991 Gulf War example.<sup>871</sup>

One year into his time in office, Obama addressed the troops at the Military Academy at West point highlighting the significance of their training “for the complexities of today’s missions” in which the skill of fighting is only one yardstick to gauge success, which also requires “understanding of the cultures and traditions and languages” of the countries where they are deployed.<sup>872</sup> While recognizing the role of the military in advancing American interests, Obama noted that “the rest of us must do our part” by working on the basis that American “strength and influence abroad begins with steps we take at home.” What Obama views as the “integrated capabilities” that should be built to support the military include not only “the economic sources of our strength” but also education, clean energy, and innovation. The integration of these sources of power with the military force to conduct international affairs is meant to avoid the overextension of American power that would undermine its strength.<sup>873</sup>

---

<sup>869</sup> Obama, *Renewing American Leadership*, 7

<sup>870</sup> Ibid

<sup>871</sup> Ibid

<sup>872</sup> Obama, “*Commencement Address*, May 22, 2010

<sup>873</sup> Ibid

In her statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for her confirmation as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton advocated the use of “smart power” to conduct the country’s foreign policy. According to Clinton, such power must include “the full range of tools at our disposal—diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural—picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation” in which “diplomacy will be the vanguard of our foreign policy”<sup>874</sup> The CSIS Commission on Smart Power, set up in 2007 and cochaired by Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., concluded that if the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provided any lessons for American leaders, it was that military force is not enough to “sustain American power over time.” Instead, American policy makers should employ other “attributes of power” like the vitality of America’s “civic culture” and the “excellence of its ideas.”<sup>875</sup>

At a time when global problems rarely lend themselves to military solutions, especially with the diffused and changing nature of threats, the development and integration of other sources of American power as tools to conduct foreign policy has become more than a necessity. Such integrated approach would also spare the United States the devotion of material sources much needed for domestic priorities to sustain America’s leading position internationally. American policy makers seem also to realize that other rising powers are competing for influence internationally using the “smart power” the US has long neglected and relegated. In a region like the Middle East where anti-Americanism has not abated, non-military and smart power approaches seem to be the shortcut to achieve policy objectives.

#### **4-1-2 The Domestic Sources of America’s Global Leadership**

President Obama’s emphasis on building what he sees as the foundations of American power at home is essentially part of his foreign policy thinking on how to advance American interests and preserve its leadership abroad. In this sense, he takes the *long view* of both the nature of the challenges he set to deal with and the long term gains of the reforms he prescribed for such challenges. In his first address to a joint session of Congress, the President asserted that “we have lived through an era where too often short-term gains were prized over long-term prosperity, where we failed to look beyond the next payment, the next

---

<sup>874</sup> Quoted in Hendrik Hertzberg, “Smart Power,” *New Yorker*, January 26, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/26/smart-power>

<sup>875</sup> Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, Jr., “CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America”, CSIS, 2010, <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/csissmartpowerreport.pdf>

quarter, or the next election”<sup>876</sup> The trillions of dollars that could have been spent on a possible war on ISIS on the level of the Iraq war must have been devoted to “rebuilding our schools, our roads, our basic science and research” because this is the “long term recipe for our long-term security and success.”<sup>877</sup>

Not least among the merits of reviving the US economy is the redemption of the global trust in the liberal international order to which the US credibility and leadership is strongly tied. In a globalized world, the United States and the rest of the world have high stakes in upholding the rules that have guided the international financial system for more than half a century. “To respond to an economic crisis that is global in scope,” Obama told Congress, “we are working with the nations of the G-20 to restore confidence in our financial system, avoid the possibility of escalating protectionism, and spur demand for American goods in markets across the globe.”<sup>878</sup> Working towards such objective is driven by Obama’s perception that “the world depends on us having a strong economy, just as our economy depends on the strength of the world’s.”<sup>879</sup> Barry Buzan argues that the challenge for Obama to restore the US post-Cold War leadership stems not only from the decline of its material capacity but also the decline in the legitimacy of the “Washington consensus as the ideological legitimizer of US leadership.”<sup>880</sup> “The collapse of neoliberal ideology” Buzan goes on to argue “might yet be seen as an ideational event on the same scale as the collapse of communism in 1989.”<sup>881</sup>

By making the investment in the energy sector one of the pillars of his recovery plan, Obama envisioned a foreign policy role of this sector that is no less important than the bailout of the international financial system. Obama argues that for the new century to be American, it has to be anchored not to the number of nuclear warheads or ballistic missiles but to harnessing clean energy in which the country lags behind competitors like China, Germany and South Korea.<sup>882</sup> Energy independence, especially from Middle Eastern oil is the real battle the US should fight and win. In his speech as an Illinois Senator in 2002 against the Iraq war Obama called on President Bush to “fight to wean ourselves off Middle East oil, through an energy

---

<sup>876</sup> Barack Obama, ‘Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress,’ *The American Presidency Project*, February 24, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-1>

<sup>877</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio,” the American Presidency Project, December 18, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-steve-inskeep-national-public-radio-1>

<sup>878</sup> Obama, *Address Before a Joint Session*

<sup>879</sup> Ibid

<sup>880</sup> Barry Buzan, ‘The End of Leadership? - Constraints on the World Role of Obama’s America,’ *LSE Ideas*, 2010, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43579/>

<sup>881</sup> Ibid

<sup>882</sup> Obama, *Address Before a Joint Session*

policy that doesn't simply serve the interests of Exxon and Mobil.”<sup>883</sup> In his last year in office, little changed in Obama's strategic perception of the Middle East which almost became “of negligible relevance to the US economy?”<sup>884</sup>

A revealing sign of the significance Obama attaches to the domestic sources of power in international relations is his recurring comparison of America's performance in strategic sectors with close rivals like China and Germany. The United States is the first among developed countries in high school dropout and 50% of college students do not make it to get a degree, a symptom Obama describes as “a prescription of American decline” because “the countries that out-teach us today will outcompete us tomorrow.”<sup>885</sup> Whether in education, science, clean energy or investment in infrastructure, Obama contends that China, Germany, and India are neither “standing still” nor “playing for the second place” and that he does not “accept second place for the United States of America.”<sup>886</sup> Investment in these sectors is not only a source of economic growth but is also the way to foster the instruments necessary to compete and influence in the world of the twenty first century.

Enabling key reforms necessary for a leadership role of the United States abroad is not an easy task given the partisan and “gridlocked” nature of the current American political system. Obama views the challenge to a strong America at home and abroad as essentially and profoundly political. In an interview with Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* in August 2014, Obama perceived the US as run by “dysfunctional politics” where politicians “are rewarded for taking the most extreme maximalist positions”, which he argues to be the main obstacle to necessary and ambitious reforms. He contends that if policy makers take the right decisions, the US will continue to be not only “the dominant power” but also “the benevolent force.” He even portrayed the Middle East as a warning sign of how divisive societies encourage taking “maximalist positions” because “the more diverse the country is, the less it can afford to take maximalist positions.”<sup>887</sup>

With the strongest military, a vibrant economy, an attractive culture and the ownership of advanced technology, the United States, according to Obama, “should own the 21<sup>st</sup> century,”

---

<sup>883</sup> “Transcript: Obama's Speech Against The Iraq War” NPR, January 20, 2009,

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99591469&t=1542475475472>

<sup>884</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>885</sup> Obama, *Address Before a Joint Session*

<sup>886</sup> Barack Obama, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” The American Presidency Project, January 27, 2010, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-17>

<sup>887</sup> “Exclusive Full Interview: Obama on the World,” *New York Times*, 10 August, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnRNszsza\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnRNszsza_8)



a mission that can be made impossible because of only two variables, both of which are tied to political will.<sup>888</sup> The first is a dysfunctional political system whose shortcomings are manifest not only in presidential elections, but in a legislature that rejects needed reforms in sectors that constitute the foundation of American power. The second element, concerned more with the world, is the unwillingness of politicians to engage with the world in ways other than “invading everybody and being the world policeman.”<sup>889</sup>

Political polarization is not concerned only with domestic politics, but more importantly with foreign policy decision making, which has been paralyzed by the lack of political consensus. Obama sees the Cold War and the struggle against Communism as a catalyst of foreign policy consensus which helped take decisions on the basis of “facts and sound judgment” and not on ideology and electioneering.<sup>890</sup> The merits of foreign policy consensus were evident in unifying the American public and building trust with their leadership even on consequential matters on the scale of the Marshal Plan.<sup>891</sup> For Obama, the Iraq war was the epitome of an “ideologically driven” foreign policy adventure whose direst outcome “was missing an opportunity to build a broad base” consensus in foreign policy.<sup>892</sup>

While Obama acknowledged America’s relative decline, the rise of powers like China and India, and the limits these factors have on an ambitious American foreign policy, his perception of American power is more subtle and complex. His view of US military power as preponderant does not necessarily entail its use in all circumstances, and even when its employment meet preset standards it must be used with caution and prudence. With the rise of new threats and challenges in a new century, the United States must foster and use other, more effective sources of American power. Such sources of power, of which the country is in deficit, are domestic in nature and require a political will and uniting consensus.

#### **4-2 Obama’s Perception of the Middle East: Ideology as a Driving Force of Local Dynamics**

Obama’s view of what the US should do in the Middle East was influenced by his perception of ideology as the driving force of regional dynamics and by his revisited vision of American allies and adversaries. For Obama, the conflicts that emerged after the popular protests of 2011 are essentially sectarian; their roots date back centuries, and are therefore not amenable

---

<sup>888</sup> Obama, *Interview with Charlie Rose*

<sup>889</sup> Ibid

<sup>890</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 286

<sup>891</sup> Ibid

<sup>892</sup> Ibid, 194

to military solutions. The local population, moreover, not only hold a worldview that differs from that held by Americans, but they also see the United States as the principal source of the region's malaise and misery. American foreign policy in the Middle East has long been driven by its relationship with its principal allies and adversaries. The Nixon Doctrine advanced the strategy of relying on Saudi Arabia and Iran to outsource the mission of policing the region on behalf of the United States. President Bush launched operation desert storm to protect Saudi Arabia and halt the advance of Saddam in oil-rich areas while the Clinton administration initiated the dual containment of Iraq and Iran to weaken unfriendly adversaries. Obama, however, came with a revised, though not radical, vision of US allies and adversaries. While he often questioned his country's commitment to protect what he calls "so-called American allies," he looked at Iran as a regional hegemon with significant potential whose threat should be managed and whose leadership should be courted and accommodated.

#### **4-2-1 Sectarianism: The Constant Variable in Regional Dynamics**

As a starting point of how Obama sees the world, it should be noted that he does not have a unified vision of regional worlds. In this context, Obama does not share the pessimism that the entire world is in disorder and disarray. While for him countries in Asia and Latin America experience promising transitions to democracy and the rule of law, he considers order in the Middle East as crumbling and giving way to internal violence and conflicts.<sup>893</sup> In Asia, as in Africa and America, young people look for opportunities to better their lot by getting good education and contribute to their societies but "are not thinking about how to kill Americans."<sup>894</sup>

In his last State of the Union address Obama told Congress that "the Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia."<sup>895</sup> What Obama means by the roots of these conflicts that date back centuries is the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which he qualifies as among the forces of disorder which also have threatened nation-state system.<sup>896</sup> While such claim is simplistic and inaccurate, it suggests that hatred is an inherent characteristic of people in the region to the

---

<sup>893</sup>*Exclusive Full Interview*

<sup>894</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>895</sup> Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," *The American Presidency Project*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-19>

<sup>896</sup>"Obama on the state of the world: the extended Vox conversation," *Vox*, February 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=td7Desco-WY>

extent that the problem it creates are unsolvable.<sup>897</sup> Besides being “reductive and cynical,” argues Max Fisher, such view “paints a picture of the Middle East as perpetually at war because people there are just different.”<sup>898</sup>

For Obama, tribalism is also a driving force of divisions and conflicts in the region, a concept that does not include only sect, but also the sense of belonging to a creed or clan.<sup>899</sup> Obama’s concern with the destructiveness of tribalism is rooted in his African origins and the impact it had on the Kenyan society and on his father’s life after Kenyan independence. Obama explains that tribalism is in his DNA because he has been “navigating tribal divisions my whole life,” asserting that it is “a source of a lot of destructive acts.”<sup>900</sup> In his trip to Kenya, his father’s home country, Obama was surprised to discover that people were still interacting on the basis of “older maps of identity” and “more ancient loyalties.” His advocacy that all Kenyans are only part of larger identity, “the black identity” and the “human identity,” and that tribalism is the root cause of Africa’s lack of progress was deemed by his Kenyan counterparts as pure naivety and the cause of his father’s downfall.<sup>901</sup>

By holding such views Obama is considered to be both Hobbesian and Huntingtonian. For Obama, clinging to tribalism would lead people to see the other through the prism of “us against them,” would create social divide and discord, and would make violence the instrument of resolving differences. In this sense, ISIL is the epitome of how people exert violence against those who don’t share in their beliefs and end up “attempting to impose a rigid orthodoxy that is contrary to every bit of human progress.”<sup>902</sup> Obama’s perception that instability in the Middle East is “rooted in conflicts that date back millennia” qualifies him to be a Huntingtonian who is frustrated with Muslims’ inability to embrace liberalism, thus defying the inevitable trajectory of the “arc of history.”<sup>903</sup>

A primary consequence of sectarianism in the Middle East, according to Obama, is a polarized political life where elections are seen as a zero sum game and by which winners control and losers fall by the wayside. This was true in Iraq with El Maliki as in Syria with Bashar el Assad, two countries where dissatisfied Sunnis were marginalized and saw the use

---

<sup>897</sup>Max Fisher, “Obama's cringe-worthy line claiming Middle East conflicts 'date back millennia'” *Vox*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/12/10759008/state-union-address-obama-middle-east-millennia>

<sup>898</sup> Ibid

<sup>899</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>900</sup> Ibid

<sup>901</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 188

<sup>902</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>903</sup>Shadi Hamid, “How Iraq Warped Obama’s Worldview,” *Brookings*, March 12, 2016,

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/12/how-iraq-warped-obamas-worldview/#cancel>

of force as a pathway to reclaim power and representation. In this context, Obama stressed time and again that, because the conflicts in the region are essentially ideological and political, the US military presence or the use of force would do little to change the equation. Unlike his perception of the origins of conflicts in the Middle East, which are not amenable to military solutions, Obama believes that “a quick application of force might have been enough” to put an end to the civil war in Rwanda in the early 1990s.<sup>904</sup>

President Obama repeatedly makes the argument that his resistance to leave a residual force in Iraq, to apply even limited military force in the conflict in Syria or to initiate a large-scale military deployment against ISIS is borne out of his perception of a regional environment made complex by sectarianism and political polarization. Consistent with democracy and the previous administration’s objectives, the US could not have forced the Iraqi government to provide immunity for a residual force. The root of the problem lies in the failure of the Shia majority to reach out to other political factions, the consequences of which could have never been avoided had the US left 10000 troops behind.<sup>905</sup> Any American intervention in Syria would drag the country “into deeper and deeper commitments” because, according to those who advocate bolder military action against Assad, “it’s never going to be enough” until Assad falls.<sup>906</sup> In responding to ISIS, Obama believes the US should “refrain from jumping in with both feet” and should instead work to “determine the best tools to roll back those kinds of attitudes” the group embrace and fight for.<sup>907</sup> In this context, Obama rejects putting the US air force in the “business of the Iraq air force” or even the “Kurdish air force” and the US can get involved to support the Iraqi government only when all the Iraqis make a commitment to live and work together.<sup>908</sup> The US refusal to initiate air strikes all over Iraq when ISIL reached a momentum was meant, in Obama’s view, to pressure Maliki to make compromises and to depart from the status quo of political divisions that led to the rise of ISISL in the first place.<sup>909</sup>

Because Obama perceives these conflicts to be driven by ideology and sectarianism and are the consequence of “deeper structural problems and dynamics,” the US, with its overextended power overseas, could not bring about a desirable change which happen

---

<sup>904</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>905</sup> *Obama on the state of the world*

<sup>906</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Charlie Rose on PBS ‘Charlie Rose,’” *The American Presidency Project*, June 17, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-pbs-charlie-rose>

<sup>907</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>908</sup> *Exclusive Full Interview*

<sup>909</sup> *Ibid*

only every 50 or 100 years.<sup>910</sup> What Obama describes as “nation building,” is a “generational project” that requires “strategic patience” and the best the US could do is to “help” in this process, but “can’t do it for them.”<sup>911</sup> While the US could do little to affect democratic change, it could wait and see as the historical forces that brought change to Europe would inevitably do the same in the Middle East. If the United States tries to influence the same regional dynamics with the same tried instruments, it would face the same dire consequences, exacerbate rather than solve problems, and overstretch a war-weary military

#### **4-2-2 Changing Perceptions of Allies and Adversaries**

Although President Obama did not break with the strategic partnership the US has built with Sunni Gulf states, he did press for a more burden-sharing approach to deal with regional problems. He also asserted that US commitment to these states is not unconditional and that his country cannot be an arm of a faction against another. As for Iran, Obama departed from his predecessor’s conception of Iran as a ‘rogue state’ or part of an axis of evil’ and depicted Tehran more as a responsible stakeholder in the region.

##### **4-2-2-1 Iran: The “Powerful Country” with a “Worldview”**

President Obama’s views of America’s regional allies and adversaries differ from those held by his immediate predecessors, which have had far-reaching policy implications. Although President Clinton and Bush operated in a different international environment, where the United States enjoyed unapparelled strength, their perceptions of Iran and its leadership did inform their respective Iran policies. In the face of what it considered Iran’s efforts to rebuild its military following the losses of the Iran-Iraq war, the Clinton administration saw the need to avoid a traditional balance of power approach to balance Iran and Iraq against each other and to adopt an active “dual containment” policy with the necessity to act towards this end even unilaterally.<sup>912</sup> Such policy option is based on “a clear-headed assessment of the antagonism that both regimes harbor towards the United States and its allies in the region” and the perceived hostility of the two regimes towards American interests.<sup>913</sup>

---

<sup>910</sup> Obama, *Interview with Charlie Rose*

<sup>911</sup> Obama, *Interview with Charlie Rose on PBS ‘Charlie Rose*

<sup>912</sup>Indyk, *The Clinton Administration's Approach*

<sup>913</sup> Ibid.

Following the 9/11 attacks President Bush expanded the sources of threat to the United States beyond terrorist groups and organizations and included what he dubbed “the axis of evil” which included Iran.<sup>914</sup> David Frum, Bush’s speechwriter and the author of the “axis of evil” phrase, contends that the “struggle America is in is a morale struggle” that goes beyond “the normal stuff of politics” which revolves around “competing interests.”<sup>915</sup> After eight years of the Bush presidency, Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution concludes that the administration’s failure to achieve its Iran policy objectives is the consequence of “miscalculation” and a “wholesale misreading of Iran’s internal political dynamics,” and most importantly the misperception that the Iranian regime “was on the verge of collapse or revolutionary upheaval.”<sup>916</sup>

What would guide Obama’s foreign policy towards Iran is a different view of the country and its political leadership, one that is informed not mostly by the threats Iran poses or entirely by ideology, but one based essentially on realpolitik. As a starting point, Obama perceives Iran not as a “rogue state” or part of an “axis of evil”, but a state whose behavior is “strategic” not “impulsive” with a leadership that has a “worldview” and are driven by interests and the calculation of costs and benefits. Unlike North Korea, Iran is a “large, powerful country that sees itself as an important player on the world’s stage.”<sup>917</sup> The fact that Iran is a responsible stakeholder in the international system is what made it “respond to incentives” and finally agree to negotiate its nuclear program.<sup>918</sup> Obama also sees Iran as a state that the US is in competition with and not a non-state actor that is “blowing homes in your country or trying to overthrow your government.”<sup>919</sup>

Apart from Obama’s assessment of Iran’s current power and position, he also situates the country and its policy objectives in a historical context that has an explanatory power of why Tehran behaves the way it does. Given Iran’s long history and civilization and the potential of its educated population, the country qualifies to be a regional economic power if the Iranian leadership agrees a nuclear deal and American sanctions are lifted. Consequently, the main obstacle to Iran becoming a regional power is not US Iran policy or the sanctions

---

<sup>914</sup> George Bush, “President Delivers State of the Union Address” *The White House*, January 29, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

<sup>915</sup> “Analysis: The Long Reach of a Speech,” *PBS*,

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/axis/axis.html>

<sup>916</sup> Suzanne Maloney, “U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forward,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*32, no. 2 (Summer 2008)

<sup>917</sup> Obama, *Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg*

<sup>918</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>919</sup> *Ibid*

regime but the choice of the Iranian leadership not to change course.<sup>920</sup> Six months into his time in office, Obama asserted that his “personal view of the Islamic State of Iran” is that it has a strong potential to be “an extraordinary and powerful country” without the need to develop nuclear weapons and so his administration sees an opportunity “to open the door and see if they walk through.”<sup>921</sup>

Iran’s position as a strong and influential player that the US has to contend with is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Syria. For President Obama, arming the Syrian opposition “was never in the cards” simply because the balance of power could not be reversed in favor of the opposition. The weak opposition composed of former farmers and doctors fighting against a “well-armed Syrian state” that was back by Iran and its regional proxy Hezbollah, both of which have long history of fighting unconventional and proxy wars.<sup>922</sup>

Such perception of Iran, as a large and influential state, has had two direct policy implications for the Obama administration. The first is that the United States cannot resolve all the differences with Iran and by extension cannot diffuse all the threats it poses to American interests and allies in the region. The right course is therefore to pick and choose the most urgent and consequential threat to deal with. The choice was certainly to prevent Iran from going nuclear even at the expense of what many within and outside the Obama administration perceives to be Iran’s “destabilizing” activities in the region. The second policy implication is that military force is the last option as its potential downsides far outweigh any potential gains.

The nuclear issue with Iran falls within Obama’s larger perspective on non-proliferation. Even before becoming president Obama made the pledge to get rid of such weapons and saw such objective as more consequential in the Middle East because of the argument made by people in the region that Israel does not play with the rules of the game by its possession of a nuclear arsenal. What is more critical for Obama, however, is that a nuclear Iran would make all other threats from Tehran worse and would directly jeopardize American interests. Negating the argument that his inaction against Assad after the use of chemical weapons would embolden Iran, Obama contends that “what the Iranians understand is that the nuclear

---

<sup>920</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview With Bahman Kalbasi of BBC Persian in New York City .” The American Presidency Project, September 24, 2010, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-bahman-kalbasi-bbc-persian-new-york-city>

<sup>921</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview With Justin Webb of BBC World News,” June 1, 2009, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-justin-webb-bbc-world-news>

<sup>922</sup> *Exclusive Full Interview*

issue is a far larger issue for us than the chemical weapons issue” because the threat a nuclear Iran poses to Israel is “much closer to our core interests” and “a nuclear arms race in the region is something that would be profoundly destabilizing.”<sup>923</sup>

What Obama had to contend with in domestic politics is the counterargument his critics advance to debunk his view and policy. Politicians and pundits, especially from the right, contend that a nuclear agreement that would lift economic sanctions would make Iran more intimidating. Even when under sanctions and “in the midst of real hardship”, Obama told Jon Sopel of the BBC, Iran was willing to keep a lifeline to serve and protect what it sees as its “strategy priorities” and was able to use proxies like Hezbollah to threaten Israel with limited means.<sup>924</sup> So what the US should work on, apart from reaching a nuclear deal, is to acquire “the interdiction capacity,” and the building of “much stronger defense against some of these proxy wars and asymmetric efforts.”<sup>925</sup>

The other fundamental policy implication of Obama’s view of Iran is that military force is not the antidote to a nuclear Iran. Obama rejects the notion that the alternative to a negotiated agreement with Iran is a limited military operation that could rid Tehran of its nuclear capabilities. In his position as a commander in chief, Obama believes in his “pretty good judgment as to whether or not this problem can be solve militarily” and his judgment is that “it is a lot better if we solve it diplomatically.”<sup>926</sup> Along with his belief that change in the Middle East is a long and generational process, Obama also take the long view in the consequences of using military force against Iran. His relegation of the military option stems from his conviction that “there are always consequences to military action that are unpredictable and spin out of control”<sup>927</sup>

The need to arrive at a negotiated agreement with Iran on its nuclear program did not only require the exclusion of military confrontation but also the resistance to further sanctions on Iran advanced by Republicans in Congress and by Israel. The imposition of further sanctions would be a breach of faith in the US intention to solve the issue diplomatically and could also be used by hardliners inside Iran to win political points. Obama’s adage along the diplomatic

---

<sup>923</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC’s ‘This Week’” September 15, 2013, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-george-stephanopoulos-abc-this-week>

<sup>924</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Jon Sopel of BBC,” July 25, 2015, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-jon-sopel-bbc>

<sup>925</sup> Obama, *Interview with Jon Sopel*

<sup>926</sup> Obama, *Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg*

<sup>927</sup> Ibid



dealings with Tehran was: “you don’t start shooting in the middle of the room during the course of negotiations”<sup>928</sup> “Shooting in the middle of the room” for Obama extends the relegation of military confrontation or the escalation of sanctions but it also involves a direct collision with Iran in Syria. Obama’s near-absent criticism of Iranian involvement in Syria is revealing not only of his belief that Iran is depleting its declining resources but also of his view that a military or diplomatic collision with Iran in Syria would jeopardize the ongoing negotiations. From the beginning of his Presidency, Obama’s overarching objective in the Middle East was the prevention of a nuclear Iran, regardless of the changing regional dynamics.

#### **4-2-2-2 America’s “So-called Allies” in the Gulf**

In pursuing an approach of limited involvement in the Syrian conflict and an accommodating diplomacy with Iran, Obama sees himself as defying not only the Washington playbook but also the traditional expectations of America’s allies in the Gulf. In doing so, Obama was also implicitly challenging the categorization of America’s regional allies and adversaries. In his speech at an anti-war rally held against the invasion of Iraq, Obama called on the Bush administration to fight worthy wars that would “make sure our *so-called allies* in the Middle East, the Saudis and the Egyptians” abide by the rules of good governance.<sup>929</sup> While President Obama did not break with an alliance with Sunni Arab states that lasted for more than half a century, he seems to question the foundational logic that commits the United States to the requirements and expectations of such alliance.

Along with his perception of the ideological divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the region as a source of regional tensions, Obama also sees the undemocratic system of government that Sunni Arab states adopt as a source of popular discontent, radicalization and even violence. What Obama calls the “ready recruits of terrorist cells” are the consequence of oppression, economic mismanagement, lack of educational opportunities and the loss of hope.<sup>930</sup> For these allies to affectively confront their adversaries, namely Iran and ISIS, Obama contends that they should do less of the traditional military buildup and work to address “the social and political issues” that Iran uses to mobilize local Shia population or ISIS employs to win new disciples.<sup>931</sup>

---

<sup>928</sup> Ibid

<sup>929</sup> *Nobel Lecture by Barack H. Obama*

<sup>930</sup> Ibid

<sup>931</sup> Obama, *Interview with Jon Soper*

Obama's understanding of the roots of bad governance in the Middle East is not essentially social or political as much as it is religious. Obama told Jeffrey Goldberg that the argument he wanted to make through his speech to the Muslim World in Cairo is that the source of problems in the Middle East is not Israel but bad governance which is the product of the "fact that some currents of Islam have not gone through a reformation that would help people adapt their religious doctrines to modernity."<sup>932</sup> Obama suggests that the way to deal with these problems is for Muslims to debate and rethink the relationship between Islam and the lack of progress in the region.

In his call for Muslims to reform their religion as a way to adapt to modernity and in accordance to what Christianity underwent Shadi Hamid argues Obama is advocating a similar change for two religions with different "founding and evolution."<sup>933</sup> While the Christian reformation was the consequence of "clerical despotism," Muslim clerics in the early time of Islam were a check on the ruling class, which has become in modern time the principle reason of the region's malaise and instability. Obama's reference to Indonesian women's adherence to Islamic dress as a drift to extremism is revealing of his understanding that "to be truly 'modern' is to adopt a particular set of views about gender equality, or more generally, to be or become liberal."<sup>934</sup> Obama believes that the shift Indonesia underwent, from a "relaxed" mode of Islam to one that is "more fundamentalist" and Arab-oriented is the consequence of the educational activities undertaken by countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, referring to the latter as a state that "cannot function in the modern world when it is oppressing half of its population."<sup>935</sup>

Obama also sees the competition, and the occasional confrontation, between the Sunni Gulf states and Iran from an ideological prism, namely the Sunni Shia divide. Consequently, the escalation of conflicts and sectarian proxy wars is essentially the consequence of a cold war-like competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the only way to end these conflicts is by the two countries reconciling differences through finding "an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold war peace." What is not in the interest of the US, Obama contends, is taking the side of its regional allies against Iran which entails American intervention every time a proxy or a sectarian war erupts.<sup>936</sup>

---

<sup>932</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>933</sup> Hamid, *How Iraq Warped*

<sup>934</sup> Ibid

<sup>935</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>936</sup> Ibid

In this context, President Obama admits the existence of a change in the balance of power in the region which is not in line with the Sunni Gulf states' preferences. The shifts "that are taking place in the region" Obama argues, "have caught a lot of them off guard," which signals an end to decades-long of American complacency with "an existing order and the existing alignments."<sup>937</sup> In this context, Obama sees the Syrian crisis within the larger picture of a "new security architecture" he wants to see in the Middle East, one which aims to balance America's allies, namely Saudi Arabia and Israel, against its traditional foe, the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>938</sup> The "geopolitical equilibrium" Obama wants to see between America's allies and adversaries can be characterized by competition and even suspicion but not with direct conflict or proxy war.<sup>939</sup> Such confrontation is not only costly to the states involved but would also threaten disorder and the creation of failed states that would breed terrorism and extremism. For Obama, having functioning states in the region is the most valuable asset the US should guard.<sup>940</sup>

While President Obama repeatedly assured America's allies in the region of US commitment to their security, he does not see the involvement on the side of these allies in proxy wars waged on ideological grounds as a commitment his administration should make. Obama seems unmoved by these allies' discontent with the diplomatic approach he charted with Tehran as he sees a nuclear deal with Iran the key to mitigate other Iranian threats and as a possible stepping stone to cultivate less adversarial relations with Iranian elites and society. Along with the necessity to adapt to such change in America's approach to the region, America's Sunni Arab states, Obama contends, should work on deeper structural reforms that would attend to the political, economic and social needs of a discontented local population.

### **4-3 Obama's Perception of America's Role in the Middle East**

In accordance with his perception of America's declining resources and the limits of military force to affect change, especially in a region like the Middle East where, as Obama sees it, divisions and conflicts date back centuries and are the product of ideological divides, President Obama envisions a commensurate role of his country in the region. Such vision, however, is not entirely coherent, nor does it lend itself to prescribed ideological

---

<sup>937</sup> Barack Obama, *Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg*

<sup>938</sup> Lee Smith, *The Consequences of Syria* (California: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), p5

<sup>939</sup> Ibid

<sup>940</sup> Ibid, p25

categorization but is the product of what Obama calls “a jumble of warring impulses”<sup>941</sup> For Obama’s Middle East policy, America’s role would be guided by a mixture of hard-headed realism and Wilsonian idealism.

#### **4-3-1 Obama the Hardheaded Realist: The “Indispensable” power with Limited Responsibilities**

In his interviews and official statements, President Obama makes a clear connection between what he calls America’s “core national interests” and his willingness to use force to protect them even unilaterally. As a hardheaded realist, he also admits that violence cannot be eliminated and states “will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.”<sup>942</sup> In this context, he agrees that the idealist notion purporting that violence would only breed violence cannot be the constant guiding principle of his administration and as a commander in chief of the United States he would resort to force to protect the American people. What Obama sees a necessity to use force, against el Qaida or fascist Germany, “is not a call to cynicism [but] a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.”<sup>943</sup>

In a similar vein, Obama repeatedly argues that a clear distinction has to be made between what is a core national interest and what is not. For the protection of the former, which include the defense of the US, its people, and its allies, the US can act militarily and unilaterally. While promoting “freedom” remains an objective that could make the country more secure, it is not to be carried out through military force because past experiences demonstrate that the use of force backfires when not supported by people at home and abroad.<sup>944</sup> In this context, “the threshold of military action must be higher” when crises globally have a shared impact and do not threaten American core interests directly. To deal with these crises the US should marshal international support and resort to non-military means like sanctions, diplomacy, development, or even a multilateral military action sanctioned by international law.<sup>945</sup>

Despite its declining power and the rise of competitors, Obama still sees his country as the indispensable nation whose role as the guardian of the liberal international order is needed and even welcomed. With the absence of the superpower competition that characterized the Cold War, the US becomes the only power tasked to maintain an international order ruled by

---

<sup>941</sup>Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 280

<sup>942</sup>*Nobel Lecture by Barack H. Obama*

<sup>943</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>944</sup> Obama, *Commencement Address*, May 28, 2014

<sup>945</sup> *Ibid*

law in the face of regional competition for spheres of influence. The US role in the Middle East in particular is to “help usher in a new order” that should abide by the broader international order that can “serve everyone.”<sup>946</sup> A shortcut to such objective is to prevent a regional hegemon from controlling the region, or what Obama prefers to call the promotion of a “regional equilibrium” between America’s allies and adversaries, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Obama’s Middle East policy would be less ambiguous when seen from such prism of regional balance of power. The significance Obama attaches to the nuclear deal with Iran stems from his belief that a nuclear Iran would disturb the existing balance of power and trigger a regional nuclear arms race. In the same manner, Obama rejects that his country plays the role of a “military arm of an anti-Iran or anti-Assad Middle East strategy” because a clear distinction has to be made between “the regional interests and the jockeying that’s taking place from our core interests as a country.”<sup>947</sup> For Obama, the best way to help Arab states in the Gulf rein in Iran’s “destabilizing activities” and to defend their sovereignty is by “making sure they build their capacity.”<sup>948</sup> What Obama describes as a “smart investment” is the support of regional allies to “maintain order in their own neighborhoods” because this would reduce “the need for us to put our own troops in harm’s way.”<sup>949</sup>

While Obama sees the United States as the guardian of the liberal international order, he still admits the limited responsibility of his country to rebuild nations or remake societies in the American image. Obama believes Americans “tend to have fantasies” about the US ability to affect change in other societies and that such “fantasies” are made obsolete by historical analogies.<sup>950</sup> In the White House deliberations concerning the possible military solutions in Syria, Obama asked his team to find out any example where a military support to one side of a conflict abroad brought about “a peaceful, functional society,” and overthrew “a dictatorial regime that is supported by outside powers;” the answer for Obama was simply there was none.<sup>951</sup> Even before the war on Iraq was waged in 2003, Obama as an Illinois senator predicted that even if the military operation against Iraq was successful, the United States would have to occupy the country with “undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with

---

<sup>946</sup>*Exclusive Full Interview*

<sup>947</sup> Obama, *Interview with Charlie Rose*, April 19, 2016

<sup>948</sup> Obama, *Interview with Jon Sopel*

<sup>949</sup> Obama, *Commencement Address*, May 28, 2014

<sup>950</sup> Obama, *Interview with Charlie Rose* April 19, 2016

<sup>951</sup> *Ibid*

undetermined consequences.”<sup>952</sup> More consequentially, the war would “encourage the worst, rather than the best impulses of the Arab world” and would inevitably become a recruiting tool for el Qaida and its affiliates.<sup>953</sup> In this context, the Libyan experience seems to be an aberration to Obama’s rulebook of military interventions and a framework to decide on future military interventions. While Libya would have been Syria absent US-led military intervention, the US and its European allies should have come “full force” after ousting Gadhafi to build a society that has no “civic traditions.”<sup>954</sup> Despite the UN mandate to launch the military operation, the military support of European and Arab allies, the relatively low cost of the operation, Obama still believes “Libya is a mess.”<sup>955</sup>

In distancing himself from the agenda of remaking societies advanced by his predecessor, Obama seems to advance the argument that change in societies comes from within and that the United States can only help in the process. For those who blame the region’s ills on Obama’s actions or inactions, Obama argues that while the United States continues to enjoy a superpower and an indispensable nation status, it “cannot do for them [people of the region] what they are unwilling to do for themselves.”<sup>956</sup> Although the overwhelming use of the US military power can provide stability and an inclusive political framework in the short term, it is ultimately the responsibility of people in the region to accept living in an inclusive society.<sup>957</sup> The best role the US can take, according to Obama, is to cooperate with the “best impulses” that believe in democracy and the rule of law and resist the “bad impulses” that are driven by the politics of exclusion.<sup>958</sup> While this is true in the Middle East as elsewhere in the world, it is more challenging in this region because of “creaky” and self-interested regimes, the lack or absence of “civic traditions” and the consequence is that “you have to start from scratch.”<sup>959</sup>

Such belief in the limited role the US can play to bring about change in the Middle East is driven by Obama’ belief in liberal determinism and in the difficulty of change in complex environments. In the Middle East, Obama believes that “there is going to be this long, difficult transition moving to a different kind of society,” in the same manner as the European countries experienced after the Second World War where corrupt, authoritarian regimes

---

<sup>952</sup>*Transcript: Obama's Speech Against The Iraq War*

<sup>953</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>954</sup>*Exclusive Full Interview*

<sup>955</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>956</sup>*Exclusive Full Interview*

<sup>957</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>958</sup> Obama, *Interview with Mika Brzezinski*

<sup>959</sup> *Ibid*

could not withstand the social and economic forces of change.<sup>960</sup> The same can be said for humanitarian interventions as the US “can’t, at any given moment, relieve all the world misery” and therefore the US should be selective where it can make a difference and “to do good at a bearable cost.”<sup>961</sup>

Obama’s belief in hard-headed realism seems to justify his tendency to manage problems not to solve them. His view of the world as a “tough, complicated, messy, mean place” dictates that the United States should “pick and choose our spots” to advance American interests and uphold its values but cannot necessary “solve problems” wherever they emerge.<sup>962</sup> In this regard, Obama’s childhood, specially the views of his Indonesian stepfather, had much influence on his realist reasoning. In his memoir *Dreams from My Father*, Obama reveals that his Indonesian stepfather was the primary source of his understanding of the world of which his knowledge was “inexhaustible”. Realism was the guiding principle of Lolo’s practices and beliefs. He once instructed Obama about the impossibility of stamping out all the misery in the world, noting that he could not help every bagger he meets on the street, or else he becomes one of them. This has nothing to do with morality of what is right and wrong but it “was a matter of taking life on its own terms”<sup>963</sup>

Despite Obama’s pessimism about abrupt and radical change in the Middle East, he still believes that the United States can play a positive role through other less costly instruments, especially to improve America’s image and standing. As much as he is a realist, Obama is also an idealist who considers the use of all the elements of American power, be it diplomacy, development, and America’s democratic values, as the shortcut to bring about change in line with American preferences with the objective of advancing American interests.

#### **4-3-2 Obama the Visionary Idealist: The “Exceptional” Power that Leads by Example**

As an academic with a strong faith in history to inform foreign policy, Obama looks back at the triumph of his country in the Cold War as a reference point to guide his foreign policy in the new century. Although America’s overwhelming economic and military power was indispensable to win the battle against Communism, the power of American ideals was no less significant. Policy makers of the time “married Wilson’s idealism to hardheaded realism” which suggests “an acceptance of American power with a humility regarding America’s

---

<sup>960</sup> Ibid

<sup>961</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

<sup>962</sup> Ibid

<sup>963</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), p27

ability to control events around the world.”<sup>964</sup> Because America’s power is neither absolute nor limitless, a battle of ideas was also necessary to prove to the world that America’s ideals, values and system of governance are the best suited to serve humanity.<sup>965</sup> Then as now, Obama believes that leading by example is the best role the US should assume to achieve its policy objectives.

In an address at the US air force academy in Colorado, Obama told cadets that despite America’s military strength, “many of the threats to our security cannot be solved by military force alone” and so the US has to “draw on every tool, all elements of national power,” chief among them “the power of our ideas [and] the power of our example.”<sup>966</sup> For Obama, America’s ideals and values is what make it exceptional and “American exceptionalism” is therefore alive and well. When asked whether he believes in American exceptionalism and the leadership role it entails, Obama stated that he believes America is exceptional as much as the British or the Greeks think of their nations as exceptional, but he further explains that what makes America exceptional is not only its strong military and robust economy but the vitality of its democratic values and its constitution.<sup>967</sup>

The kind of American exceptionalism Obama believes in, therefore, is distinct from the one advanced by his predecessor, which in turn dictates a distinct role for the US to play in the world and in the Middle East. Philip S. Gorski & William McMillan distinguish between “crusader exceptionalism”, (CE) which is advanced and practiced by many in the republican party, and “prophetic exceptionalism” (PE) which is championed by president Obama. While Bush worked to promote a type of crusader exceptionalism through imposing democracy on others, Obama hoped that values and ideas which he thinks are universal would induce others to follow the US lead. The significance of this distinction is that each type dictates a certain role for the US to play in the world. CE calls for the use of America’s formidable power to convert the world to democratic capitalism; an intention driven by an evangelical creed that stresses the “holiness of America and the possibilities of perfection.” Obama’s PE, however, calls for Americans to repent “their collective sins and strive to be an

---

<sup>964</sup>Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*

<sup>965</sup> Ibid

<sup>966</sup> Barack Obama, “Commencement Address at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado” The American Presidency Project, June 2, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-the-united-states-air-force-academy-colorado-springs-colorado-1>

<sup>967</sup>Office of the Press Secretary, “News Conference By President Obama,” *White House*, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/news-conference-president-obama-4042009>



example to the world”; it is Augustinian in nature and stresses “the plentitude of American sins and the difficulties of reform.”<sup>968</sup>

For Obama, American influence is best served when the US leads by example internationally, and most crucially, when it abides by the same rules that it lectures others to follow. The ratification of international conventions is the best way to ensure that the US can solve global problems, a step that signifies leadership and strength and not retreat or weakness.<sup>969</sup> Using the same rhetoric that his predecessors employed to frame their vision of the nation’s foreign policy, that is the creed of American exceptionalism, Obama contends that “what makes America exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law, it is our willingness to affirm them through actions.”<sup>970</sup> If the US fails to uphold the same international institutions that it helped create, Obama told Fareed Zakaria, “then our power will be diminished, no matter how big our military budget is” and this would precipitate a “much more dangerous world.”<sup>971</sup> Obama argues that the overarching objective of reaching a deal with Iran is not to win points in domestic politics but to show the world the US “ability to craft international agendas, to reach international agreements, [and] to deliver on them”<sup>972</sup> In the case of Syria, President Obama argues that any US military action to affect regime change would have been unilateral because of the lack of support from the Europeans and if the US went alone, it would end up acting against international law.<sup>973</sup>

Obama’s critics note what they see as a contradiction between Obama’s lofty rhetoric of American exceptionalism and his humble actions to meet the expectations of the role conferred on the US by such creed. Georg Löfflmann argues that the “leading from behind” approach in Libya and the minimum involvement of the Obama administration in Syria signals a “conceptual gap between identity and policy.”<sup>974</sup> It is worth noting here that Obama rarely intends leading military interventions or the use of force to change unfriendly regimes as a sign of American exceptionalism. He rather advances the view that the ability of the US

---

<sup>968</sup> Philip S. Gorski & William McMillan, “Barack Obama and American Exceptionalisms,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 24 May, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2012.682513>

<sup>969</sup> Obama, *Commencement Address*, May 28, 2014

<sup>970</sup> Ibid

<sup>971</sup> Barack Obama, “Interview with Fareed Zakaria of CNN’s ‘GPS’” August 9, 2015, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-fareed-zakaria-cnns-gps>

<sup>972</sup> Ibid

<sup>973</sup> Obama, *Interview with Charlie Rose*, April 19, 2016

<sup>974</sup> Georg Löfflmann, “From the Obama Doctrine to America First: the erosion of the Washington consensus on grand strategy,” *International Politics*, 20 February 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00172-0>

to marshal international support behind issues of global concern and the conclusion of international agreements as the epitome of American leadership.

In the same manner, President Obama distinguishes between policy objectives and the right instruments to achieve them. On the democratization agenda advanced by his predecessor, Obama admits that the Bush administration aimed to retaliate against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and to change societies in the Middle East through the same instrument of military force, noting that “cultural differences” between America and Middle East can be best approached through “diplomacy and conversation and some self-reflection on our part.”<sup>975</sup> In his first address to the UN general assembly Obama pointed out that democratization cannot be imposed from the outside, that no system of government is ever perfect, and that the way societies rule themselves should reflect their histories and traditions.<sup>976</sup> Even the perception of the Muslim community as “monolithic” is inaccurate because differences between countries like Pakistan, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia do exist not only in terms of faith but also in national identity.<sup>977</sup>

Such watered down rhetoric on democratization and the way to achieve it is part of Obama’s objective to revamp America’s legitimacy and credibility as “a force of good,” an ingredient necessary to win disciples and mitigate local resistance to American foreign policy. In this sense, Obama resorted to his rhetorical skills and eloquence as an alternative to America’s military might to convince people of America’s noble cause and its good intentions. He even admits the imperfection of the United States and its need for redemption. What Obama called the “business of bullying folks in doing things that we can’t do for ourselves” is not the best American tradition, but is rather an aberration which, when tried, “never worked out that well”<sup>978</sup> Obama seems to practice what the Harvard scholar James T. Kloppenberg terms “philosophical pragmatism”, which requires “humility” on the part of Americans and calls for constant self-criticism of one’s actions and the engagement with adversaries “to test the viability and persuasion of one’s cause.” For this reason, the United States cannot proceed by “certainty” but should aim at “creating provisional, and fragile, conditions for overlapping consensus.”<sup>979</sup>

---

<sup>975</sup> Obama, Interview With Justin Webb

<sup>976</sup> Obama, *Remarks to the United Nations*, September 23, 2009

<sup>977</sup> Obama, *Interview With Justin Webb*

<sup>978</sup> Obama, *Interview with Steve Inskeep*

<sup>979</sup> James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, (US: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp 241-242

The consensus President Obama tried to build with the Muslim world through his speech in Cairo centered on the idea that both Muslims and Americans are victims of the same enemy. Both Americans and Muslims are the victims of misperception and stereotyping, the former of imperialism and the latter of terrorism and violent extremism. Obama also built on another uniting theme between Muslims and America, the threat they both face from “violent extremism” which should unite the two to work in partnership and not in competition arguing that “the enduring faith of over a billion people is so much bigger than the narrow hatred of a few.”<sup>980</sup>

Unlike what his critics believe, Obama suggests that the US credibility is best served by restraint and “strategic patience” and not by the overwhelming use of force. The Syrian example is a textbook of how America’s disengagement, informed by anti-Americanism in the region, is creating a vacuum that no other power is ready to fill, validating the notion that “the danger to the world is not an America that is eager to immerse itself in the affairs of other countries or to take on every problem in the region as its own.”<sup>981</sup> The message Obama seems to convey is that it is not America’s involvement that is creating problems in the region, but its unwillingness to own them or invest in their resolution. With regard to the US military response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, Obama had a very different perception of credibility. While the Pentagon and his White House advisers argued the US inaction would deal a blow to the country’s credibility globally, Obama believes that the very inability of eliminating the Syria chemical weapons through airstrikes and the continuation of Assad in power would validate the claim that Assad “had successfully defied the United States, that the United States had acted unlawfully in the absence of a UN mandate,” and such action “would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it.”<sup>982</sup>

Obama’s perception of America’s role in the world and the Middle East as a leader by example is informed by his belief that military strength is only one component of American power and that American ideals and ideas are not only more effective but are also a low-cost alternative in a region rife with anti-American sentiment. The exercise of what Obama calls “strategic patience” in the Middle East, whether by refraining from deeper military involvement or from advancing a democratic agenda, aims at demonstrating that it is America’s restraint not its involvement that is creating or exacerbating problems. He also

---

<sup>980</sup> Barack Obama, “President Obama’s Speech in Cairo: a New Beginning,” US Department of State, June 4, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2009/124342.htm>

<sup>981</sup> Obama, *Remarks to the United Nations*, September 24, 2013

<sup>982</sup> Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*

aims to promote an image of his country as a force of good whose ultimate objective to see a region that is stable and self-reliant. What President Bush could not achieve through force, Obama hoped he would reach through the power of leading by example.

## **Conclusion**

Though Obama admits that the United States is no longer the unrivaled superpower it used to be by the end of the Cold War, he insists that the nation can still restore its preponderance if it builds on the elements of power necessary to compete in the new century. Past experiences demonstrate the limits of military power to direct events, especially in complex environments like the Middle East. What the country needs therefore is an integrated or a whole of government approach that combines all the elements of American power including a vibrant economy, and active diplomacy and a cutting edge educational system and scientific research. Such endeavor, however, can hardly be realized absent a functional political system that is driven neither by ideology nor by the politics of winning elections.

President Obama perceives the Middle East and its dynamics as not only driven by ideology but he also present it as a warning sign for Americans of how widely diverse societies can fall in the trap of taking extreme positions and therefore prevent needed political reforms. As the United States failed to achieve its policy objectives through two costly wars in the region, it will face the same fate if it resorts to the same instruments in same regional dynamics. Protecting core American interests in the region and prioritizing the most urgent threats to diffuse were the guiding principle of Obama Middle East policy. The prevention of Iran from possessing nuclear weapons, the management of a regional balance of power, and the preservation of the nation-state system as a stabilizing force remained the overarching objectives of the Obama administration. Even such broad and limited objectives should be pursued with the minimum cost possible.

## General Conclusion

Obama's Middle East policy was never a radical break from that of his predecessor, but hovered between continuity and change to adapt to domestic and international realities. From a decision to another, the trajectory of American foreign policy in the Middle East steered towards retrenchment as a strategy to reduce costs, minimize risks and strike a balance between ends and means. In doing so, the Obama administration narrowed down its policy objectives, the range of threats and challenges to American interests and adopted more economical and less controversial instruments to conduct foreign policy. Such course was pursued with an ever-present perception that Middle East matters less to America's long term interests and that great power politics, namely a rising China, should increasingly define a new direction of America's interaction with the World.

In terms of policy objectives the Obama White House eschewed the transformational agenda of the Bush administration which sought to remake societies in the American image even through the unilateral use of force. Maintaining the status quo seemed more in the service of American interests than promoting change that would likely to bring to power regimes at odds with American preferences. In this regard, President Obama viewed the region not from an ideological prism but on the basis of how best to serve American interests, especially in the realm of national security. Downsizing US presence in Iraq went beyond complete troop withdrawal and extended to the termination of the police training program and the reduction in US mission Iraq and US aid to Baghdad. In Syria, the Obama administration's options to influence the direction of events continued to narrow as Assad's sponsors in Moscow and Tehran maintained their military, diplomatic and financial support to Damascus. In his late memoir on his first term in office Obama admitted that "without the economic, military, or diplomatic leverage we'd had in Egypt, the official condemnations of the Assad regime we made (and our later imposition of a U.S. embargo) had no real effect" because "Assad could count on Russia to veto any efforts we might make to impose international sanctions through the U.N. Security Council."<sup>983</sup>

While he distanced himself from any costly and transformative agenda in Iraq and Syria, President Obama made the prevention of Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons the most pressing and overarching objective of his administration in the region. Reiterating in his presidential memoir what he repeatedly stressed in interviews when in office, Obama noted

---

<sup>983</sup> Barack Obama, "A Promised Land," (US: Crown, 2020)

that “under any circumstances, Iran would have been a grade A headache for any administration. But it was the country’s accelerating nuclear program that threatened to turn a bad situation into a full blown crisis.”<sup>984</sup> The ramifications of a nuclear-armed Iran were not hard to gauge, not least of them the deterrence capability Tehran would enjoy against the US and its regional allies. Iran’s regional rivals would likely seek to acquire the same deterrent capability to ensure their security and survival. Iran’s ability to project its power through its non-state proxies would likely make a direct confrontation with Tehran costlier and without end in sight.

In responding to Iran’s nuclear program and the conflicts in Syria and Iraq the Obama administration espoused instruments that are less compatible with the “Washington playbook” which prescribed military solutions even to non-military problems. Direct war, especially one that involves ground invasion on the scale of Vietnam and Iraq, would be the last resort because, in Obama’s view, “war is never tidy and always results in unintended consequences, even when launched against seemingly powerless countries on behalf of a righteous cause.”<sup>985</sup> With a regional power like Iran, such alternative would prove costly and unlikely to achieve its policy objectives. With his approach of extending hands even to adversaries, President Obama embarked on a course of public diplomacy to ease tensions with the Iranian leadership even if this meant a passive stance with regards to the country’s human rights practices. The second strand of Obama’s approach to Iran relied on multilateral sanctions to first bring Iranians to the negotiating table and then force them to make concessions to arrive at a nuclear deal. Meanwhile, dealing with what American policy makers describe as Iran’s “destabilizing activities” in the region was put on the back burner.

While President Obama worked to defy the “Washington playbook” in some respects, he still believed that continuity in foreign policy and the adherence to the “conventional wisdom” would better serve American interests. Obama campaigned ardently against the Iraq war and put such stance to better use to win elections, but he still believes that the conduct of the recent two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan “hadn’t involve the indiscriminate bombing or deliberate targeting of civilians that had been a routine part of even ‘good wars like World War II.’”<sup>986</sup> In the realm of counterterrorism more specifically, President Obama never broke radically with the unpopular practices of the previous administration but “sought to fix those

---

<sup>984</sup> Ibid

<sup>985</sup> Ibid

<sup>986</sup> Ibid

aspects of counterterrorism effort that needed fixing, rather than tearing it out root and branch to start over.”<sup>987</sup> In their war against el Qaida, the Obama administration relied heavily on covert operations through raids by Special Operations Forces and targeted killing through manned and unmanned airstrikes. In its campaign “to degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS, the Obama White House marshaled the support of sixty countries to gather and share intelligence and formed a military coalition to share in the burden of operations. On the ground, local forces took up the bulk of fighting while Western forces assumed advisory and training missions. Such burden-sharing and “light-footprint” approach to military operations represents a hallmark in US military strategy under Obama.

Narrowing down policy objectives in the Middle East and relying on less costly instruments to achieve them figured as part of a larger vision to direct available resources to revive the domestic foundations of US global leadership. America’s relative decline becomes a foregone conclusion with the financial crisis and soaring debt and deficit which in turn put limits on what the US could do abroad. The passage of the Budget Control Act, which also limited defense spending, signals the severity of America’s dwindling resources. Reviving the US economy was not only a domestic necessity, but also a course to salvage a globalized international system on which long-term American interests are heavily dependent. The redirection of resources to promote better education, cutting-edge scientific research, and energy independence was meant to consolidate the domestic sources of US global leadership.

Obama’s approach to the Middle East seems to be driven by two main convictions, that the US has missed out on many opportunities to improve its position in the international system with its overreach in the Middle East and that long-term American interests are best served with pivoting the Asia Pacific region. Despite the lack of clear and unifying threat to its national interests after the fall of the Soviet Union, American policy makers continued to invest in their country’s hard power while relegating other sectors with more long-term gains. Such military preponderance fed an inclination to prescribe military solutions to most challenges and perceiving peripheral threats, especially in the Middle East, as existential and on a par with those that faced the country in the Second World War and thereafter. In the meantime, US competitors like China and even partners like Japan and Germany have been building the elements of power needed to compete in the new century.

---

<sup>987</sup> Ibid

While preoccupied with nation building at home, President Obama approached the world with hard-headed realism and a belief that American power can do little to change the behavior of others, that change can be at best incremental and that American ideals, while necessary to advance American interests, can be promoted with caution and through leading by example. Obama's reluctance to get immersed in regional dynamics is justified by the uncertainty of what come next and that any initial and partial intervention would call for more costly commitments. Such stance is also the product of Obama's conviction that other nations are also driven by complex calculations like their national interests, ideologies, and their collective identities. To critics who accused him of falling short to turn his promises into realities President Obama admits that he often questioned whether "abstract principles and high-minded ideals were and always would be nothing more than a pretense, a palliative, a way to beat back despair" and that "no matter what we said or did, history was sure to run along its predetermined course, an endless cycle of fear, hunger and conflict, dominance and weakness?"<sup>988</sup>In this regard, Obama took the long view about both American interests and how best to serve them. The US should thus revive the domestic foundations of its global power to better contend with an increasingly assertive Russia in Europe and a rising and dominant China in Asia.

What president Obama had started, President Trump seems only to confirm, that the US most urgent foreign policy priority has become great power competition with China and Russia, with the Middle East occupying a second place in US foreign policy strategy. In the Middle East, Trump seems to follow on his predecessor's footsteps by espousing more retrenchment practices that are revealing of the administration's perception of the Middle East as a less strategic region for the US in the foreseeable future. In December 2018 the Trump administration announced the withdrawal of American troops from northern Syria and did so in October of the next year, a step that induced Turkey for more military involvement to crack down the Kurdish insurgency. Turkey, Russia and Iran stepped up their military coordination in Syria and diplomatic cooperation to end the conflict with the US and its European allies having little to no say on the development of the Syrian issue. In February 2020, the US struck a deal with Taliban to withdraw American troops from the country in 14 months' time. No president has ever been so blunt about the principle of sharing and shifting burdens to allies than Donald Trump. He has long argued that the United States is exploited and American tax-payers are subsidizing the security of America's allies in the Middle East,

---

<sup>988</sup> Ibid



Europe and the Asia Pacific. In July 2020 the Trump White House ordered the withdrawal of 12000 American troops from Germany, a move that came after repeated calls for members of NATO to expand their share to the alliance. Such calls culminated in an increase by \$ 34 billion in European defense spending.<sup>989</sup> Symptomatic of its retrenchment approach the Trump administration has also stepped up its soft power initiatives to bolster its declining global leadership and to counterbalance China's growing influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. Congress during the Trump presidency passed the BUILD Act (The Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Developments) which aims to provide funds and skills through the private sector to countries with low incomes especially in Europe and Asia.

A close look at Trump's foreign policy practices more generally reveals that the United States has been gravitating more towards isolationism. Trump's dealings with international organizations and his stance on multilateral treaties is reminiscent of the US resistance to engage with the world during much of the nineteenth century and up to the First World War. President Trump's skepticism of multilateralism stems from his belief that international institutions encroach on American sovereignty and limit the country's choices in dealing with the world. In his first year in office only, President Trump withdrew from Trans-Pacific Partnership championed by the Obama administration, walked away from the Paris climate agreement, reinstated travel ban on Cubans and cut the staff of US embassy in Havana by half to undermine Obama's rapprochement with the country. In the same year he refused to certify Iranian compliance with the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and in 2018 he withdrew unilaterally from the nuclear deal while Congress reimposed sanctions against Tehran.<sup>990</sup> Trump's approach to the United Nations and its institutions is revealing of the same trend of skepticism towards international cooperation. In June 2018 the United States withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council on the premise of its hostility towards Israel and in July 2020 President Trump ordered the freezing of US funding to the World Health Organization.<sup>991</sup> From the start of his Presidency, Trump espoused an "America first" approach to foreign affairs insisting that "we will seek friendship and goodwill with the

---

<sup>989</sup> Elbridge A. Colby and Wess Mitchell, "The Age of Great Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-10/age-great-power-competition>

<sup>990</sup> "Trump's Foreign Policy Moments 2017-2020," <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/trumps-foreign-policy-moments>

<sup>991</sup> Ibid

nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.”<sup>992</sup>

With the exception of dealing the Iranian nuclear program, the Biden administration will likely continue to keep the Middle East at arm’s length to focus on a rising China in the east. The trade war with China and the denunciation of its human rights practices will also continue to be the instruments of choice to counterbalance the country’s rise and its accelerating military buildup. For this end President Biden and his team will make multilateralism the cornerstone of their foreign policy. This will include the return to the UN Organizations Trump has abandoned, the revamp of the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the consolidation of the transatlantic relations, especially with US allies in NATO. With a polarized political climate and the dire ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, America’s most pressing concerns will be mostly domestic. Restoring democracy at home, Biden argues, would be the indispensable ingredient for an active American leadership abroad.<sup>993</sup>

---

<sup>992</sup>“Remarks of President Donald J. Trump – As Prepared For Delivery Inaugural Address,” White House, January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>  
<sup>993</sup> “The Power of America’s Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>

## References

### Books

- Acharya, Amitav. *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018
- Allison, Graham. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. US: Little, Brown and Company, 1971.
- Art, Robert J. *A Grand Strategy for America*. US: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Bacevich, Andrew J. *America's War for the Greater Middle East: a Military History*. New York: Random House, 2016
- Bukovansky, Mlada, Ian Clark, Robyn Eckersley, Richard Price, Christian Reus-Smit and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012
- Citino, Nathan J. *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Saud and the Making of US-Saudi Relationship*. USA: Indiana University Press, 2002
- Clinton, Hillary. *Hard Choices*. UK: Simon and Schuster, 2014
- Cohen, Michael J. *Palestine and the Great Powers, 1945-1948*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982
- Cohen, Michael J. *Truman and Israel*. California: University of California Press, 1990
- DeNovo, John A. *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900-1939*. USA: the University of Minnesota Press, 1963
- Dobson, Alan P. *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century: of Friendship, Conflict and the Rise and Decline of Superpowers*. London: Routledge, 1995
- Dueck, Colin. *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*. US: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Fisher, Louis. *Constitutional Conflicts between Congress and the President*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2014
- Fitzgerald, David and David Ryan, *Obama, US Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Intervention*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014
- Friedman, Lawrence. *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*. Canada: Doubleday, 2008
- Friedberg, Aaron L. *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988 .
- Gates, Robert M. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. UK: WH Allen, 2014
- Gerges, Fawaz, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment*. USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

- Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Glaser, John, Christopher A. Preble, and Trevor Thrall, *Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America's Broken Foreign Policy even Worse (and how we can recover)*. USA: CATO Institute, 2019.
- Goldsmith, Jack. *Power and Constraint: The Accountable Presidency after 9/11*. U.S: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012
- Gordon, Michael and Bernard Trainor, *The End Game: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*. UK: Atlantic Books, 2012
- Haass, Richard N. and Martin Indyk, *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President*. Washington D.C., Brookings and CFR, 2008
- Haass, Richard. *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order*. U.S: Basic Books, 2013
- Hahan, Peter L. *Historical Dictionary of US-Middle East Relations*. US: Scarecrow Press, 2007
- Hahn, Peter L. *The United States, Great Britain and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the early Cold War*. USA: the University of North Carolina Press, 1991
- Hendrickson, Ryan C. *Obama at War: Congress and the Imperial Presidency*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015
- Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower: US Foreign Relations since 1776*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008
- Hudson, Valerie M. *Foreign Policy Analysis Classic and Contemporary Theory*. USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. USA: Princeton University Press, 1976
- Kennedy, Paul. *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to the Present*. New York: Random House, 1987.
- Khalidi, Rashid. *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009
- Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. U.S: Penguin Press, 2014
- Kloppenber, James T. *Reading Obama*. US: Princeton University Press, 2011
- Lippman, Thomas. *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. USA: Westview Press, 2004
- Little, Douglas. *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*. USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002
- Lo, Bobo. *Russia and the New World Disorder*. London: Chatham House, 2015

- MacDonald, Paul, and Joseph Parent. *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment*. USA: Cornell University, 2018.
- Mandelbaum, Michael. *The Fate of Nations: The Search for National Security in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press 1988.
- Nasr, Vali. *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*. London: Scribe, 2013
- Nye, Joseph. *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era*. UK: Princeton University Press, 2013
- Obama, Barack. *Dreams from my Father*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004
- Obama, Barack. *A Promised Land*. US: Crown, 2020.
- Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. UK: Canongate Books, 2008
- Panetta, Leon with Jim Newton, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015
- Paterson, Thomas G. *Meeting the Communist Threat: Truman to Reagan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998
- Posen, Barry R. *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*. USA: Cornell University Press, 2014.
- Quandt, William B. *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*. USA: Brookings Institution Press and the University of California Press, 2005
- Rhodes, Ben. *The World as It Is: Inside the Obama White House*. London: The Bodley Head, 2018
- Robinson, James. *Congress and Foreign Policy Making*. Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1962
- Rosenau, James N. ed, *Comparing Foreign Policies: Theories, Findings and Methods*. New York: Halsted Press, 1974.
- Sachs, Jeffrey. *A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018
- Sanger, David E. *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*. USA: Crown Publishers, 2012
- Sestanovich, Stephen. *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 2014.
- Shlaim, Avi. *War and Peace in the Middle East*. US: Viking Penguin, 1995
- Singh, Robert. *Barack Obama's Post American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.
- Smith, Lee. *The Consequences of Syria*. California: Hoover Institution Press, 2014

- Snyder, Jack. *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. US: Cornell University Press, 199.
- Spanier, John and Eric M. Uslaner. *How American Foreign Policy is Made*. USA: Krieger Publishing Co. Inc. 1978.
- Spanier, John and Joseph Noguee, *Congress, the Presidency and American Foreign Policy*. USA: Pergamon Press 1981
- Tooze, Adam. *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*. New York: Viking, 2018.
- Trubowitz, Peter. *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Venn, Fiona. *A Struggle for Supremacy: Great Britain, the United States, and Kuwait Oil in the 1930s*. Essex: University of Essex, 2012
- Venn, Fiona. *Oil Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*. USA: St Martin's Press, 1986
- Vertzberger, Yaacov. *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*. USA: Stanford University Press, 1990
- Wittkopt, Eugene R., Christopher M. Jones with Charles W. Kegley, Jr. *American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process*. USA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008
- Wohlforth, William. *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War*. USA: Cornell University, 1993.
- Yaqub, Salim. *The United States and the Middle East: from 1914 to 9/11*. USA: The Teaching Company, 2003
- Yergin, Daniel. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991

## Book Chapters:

Ashbee, Edward and John Dumbrell, "Introduction: the Politics of Change," in *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change*, ed. Edward Ashbee and John Dumbrell, 1-51. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

Cash, Jordan. "Attack of the Drones: National Security, Due Process, and the Constitutionality of Unmanned Strikes," in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley, 127-141. New York: Routledge, 2018

Feste, Karen A. "Terrorism Strategy Shifts from Bush to Obama," in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley, 43-73. New York: Routledge, 2018

Fisher, Louis. "Military Initiatives by President Obama," in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley, 94-92. New York: Routledge, 2018

Kitchen, Nickolas. "Hegemonic Transition Theory and U.S. Foreign Policy," in *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge, 80-92. USA: Routledge, 2014

Kitchen, Nickolas. "Structural Shifts and Strategic Change: From the War on Terror to the Pivot to Asia," in *Obama's Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror*, ed. Michelle Bentley and Jack Hoolland, 61-75. USA: Routledge, 2014

Peake, Jeffrey S. "Obama, Unilateral Diplomacy and Iran: Treaties, Executive Agreements, and Political Commitments," in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley, 142-171. New York: Routledge, 2018

Quinn, Adam. "Realism and U.S Foreign Policy," in *Obama and the World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge, 3-14. USA: Routledge: 2014

Randall, Smith, "Presidents in War and Diplomacy" in *Vital Statistics on the Presidency*, ed. Bert A. Rockman, Andrew Rudalevige & Colin Campbell, 393-466. Washington: CQ Press, 2014

Shlaim, Avi "The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett, 241-261. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005

Sinclair, Barbara. "Doing Big Things: Obama and the 111th Congress," in *The Obama Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects*, ed. Bert A. Rockman, Andrew Rudalevige & Colin Campbell, 198-222. Washington: CQ Press, 2012

Warshaw, Shirley Anne. "Obama's National Security Cabinet: The Fight to Survive White House Micromanagement," in *Presidential Leadership and National Security: the Obama Legacy and the Trump Trajectory*, ed. Richard S. Conley, 93-111. New York: Routledge 2018

## Electronic Books:

Armitage, Richard and Joseph Nye, Jr. *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America*. Washington D.C: CSIS, 2007.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/files/csissmartpowerreport.pdf>

Binnendijk, Hans. *Friends, Foes, and Future Directions*. USA: RAND Corporation, 2016, 18-19, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1210.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1210.html)

Brennan, Richard R. et al, *Ending the US War in Iraq*. US: RAND Corporation, 2013. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR232.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR232.html)

Hendrickson, Ryan. *Obama at War: Congress and the Imperial Presidency*. US: Kentucky Scholarship Online, January 2016. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14tqd3g>

Morin, Jean-Frédéric, and Jonathan Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Toolbox*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61003-0>

Nau, Henry R. "Realism," *Routledge Handbook of American Foreign Policy*, edited by Steven W. Hook, Christopher M. Jones, (London: Routledge, 2011), 61-74. <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203878637.ch5>,

Ripsman, Norrin M., Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. UK: Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2016. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.001.0001

## Journal Articles:

Acharya, Amitav. "Global International Relations and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 2014): 647–659

Adler, Selig. "The Palestine Question in the Wilson Era", *Jewish Social Studies* 10, no. 4 (Oct., 1948): 303-334

Allinson, Jamie. "The Necropolitics of Drones," *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 2 (June 2015): 113–127

Altman, Roger C. and Richard Haass, "American Profligacy and American Power: The Consequences of Fiscal Irresponsibility," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6 (November/December 2010): 25-34

Aruri, Naseer H. "The United States' Intervention In Lebanon," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4, The Realignment of Power in Lebanon: Internal and External Dimensions (Fall 1985): 59-77

Boylan, Timothy S. "War Powers, Constitutional Balance, and the "Imperial Presidency" Idea at Century's End," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (June 1999): 232-249

Brands, Henry. W. "George Bush and the Gulf War of 1991," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1, (March 2004): 113-131.



- Brecher, Frank W. "Woodrow Wilson and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict". *American Jewish Archives* 39, no. 1(1993): 23–47.
- Byman, Daniel. "Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington Weapons of Choice,"
- Christensen, Thomas J. "Perceptions and Alliances in Europe, 1865-1940," *International Organization* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 65-97
- Citino, Nathan J. "Internationalist Oilmen, the Middle East, and the Remaking of American Liberalism, 1945-1953" *The Business History Review* 84, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 227-252
- Cohen, Michael J. "Truman and Palestine, 1945-1948: Revisionism, Politics and Diplomacy," *Modern Judaism* 2, no. 1 (February 1982): 1-22
- Cohen, Naomi W. "Ambassador Straus in Turkey, 1909-1910: A Note on Dollar Diplomacy", *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45, no. 4 (March 1959): 632-642
- Curtis A. Bradley & Jack L. Goldsmith, "Presidential Control over International Law," *Harvard Law Review* 13, no. 5 (March 2018)
- Daniel, Robert L. "American Influences in the Near East before 1861," *American Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1964): 72-84
- Davidson, Janine. "The U.S. 'Pivot to Asia'," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21, Special Issue (June 2014): 77-82
- Davidson, Roger H. "Invitation to Struggle": An Overview of Legislative-Executive Relations," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 499, no. 1 (September 1988): 9-21
- DeNovo, John A. "A Railroad for Turkey: The Chester Project, 1908-1913", *The Business History Review* 33, no. 3 (Autumn, 1959): 300-329
- Dessler, David. "What's at Stake at the Agent Structure Debate," *International Organization* 43, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 441-473
- Dodge, Bayard. "American Educational and Missionary Efforts in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 401, (May 1972): 15-22
- Dodge, Bayard. "Western Education and the Middle East," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 24, no. 4, (January 1952): 51-58
- Douglas Little, "Gideon's Band: America and the Middle East since 1945," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 513-540
- Drenzer, Daniel W. "Does Obama have a Grand Strategy: Why we Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times," *Foreign Affairs* 90, n. 4 (July/August 2011): 57-68
- Esfandiary, Dina and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 1 (2015): 1–15.
- Evensen, Bruce J. "Truman, Palestine and the Cold War", *Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 1 (Jan., 1992): 120-156

- Fiammenghi, Davide, Sebastian Rosato, and Joseph M. Parent, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro,
- Fisher, Louis. "Foreign Policy Powers of the President and Congress," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 499, no. 1 (September 1988): 148-159
- Fisher, Louis. "Introduction: Invoking Inherent Powers: A Primer," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1, Special Issue: Invoking Inherent Presidential Powers (March 2007): 1-22
- Gelb, Leslie H. "The Elusive Obama Doctrine," *The National Interest*, no. 121. (Sep/Oct 2012): 18-28.
- Grabill, Joseph L. "Cleveland H. Dodge, Woodrow Wilson, and the Near East," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1970): 249-264
- Haass, Richard. "The Irony of American Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 3 (May/June 2013): 57-67.
- Hashim, Ahmed S. and Gregoire Patte, " 'What is the Buzz?' The Rise of Drone Warfare," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 4, no. 9 (September 2012), 9.
- Hamilton, Lee H. "Congress and The Presidency in American Foreign Policy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 507-511
- Howell, William G. and Jon C. Pevehouse, "When Congress Stops Wars: Partisan Politics and Presidential Power," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2007): 95-107
- Howell, William G. and Jon C. Pevehouse, "When Congress Stops Wars: Partisan Politics and Presidential Power," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2007): 95-107
- Huntington, Samuel. "Coping with the Lippmann Gap," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 3, (1987/1988): 453-477
- Jalal, Ayesha. "Towards the Baghdad Pact: South Asia and Middle East Defense in the Cold War, 1947-1955", *The International History Review* 11, no. 3 (1989): 409-433
- John J. Mearsheimer and Stephan M. Walt. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, n.4, (Jul/Aug 2016): 70-83.
- Kahl, Colin H. "Not Time to Attack Iran: Why War Should Be a Last Resort," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 166-173
- Katzman, Kenneth. "Iran Sanctions," *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East* 5, no. 1, (2014)
- Kozhanov, Nikolay. "Russian Iranian Relations through the Prism of the Syrian Crisis," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 4 (fall 2017): 105-124
- Krieg, Andreas and Jean-Mark Rickli, "Surrogate Warfare: the Art of War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Defense Studies* 18, no. 2 (January 2018): 113-130
- Krieg, Andreas. "Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 97-113
- Lieber, Robert J. "America in Decline? It's a Matter of Choices, not Fate," *World Affairs* 175, no. 3 (September/October 2012): 88-96

- Little, Douglas. "Cold War and Covert Action: The United States and Syria, 1945-1958," *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 1 (Winter, 1990): 51-75
- Little, Douglas. "His Finest Hour? Eisenhower, Lebanon, and the 1958 Middle East Crisis", *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 27-54
- Little, Douglas. "Pipeline Politics: America, TAPLINE, and the Arabs," *The Business History Review* 64, no. 2, (Summer 1990): 256-287
- Little, Douglas. "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-68" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 04, (November 1993): 563-585
- MacDonald, Paul and Joseph Parent. "Graceful Decline: The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment" *International Security* 35, no 4. (Spring 2011): 7-44
- Maloney, Suzanne. "U.S. Policy Toward Iran: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forward," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2008)
- Maza, Herbert. "Turkish-Arab Economic Relations with the United States," *World Affairs* 141, no. 3 (Winter 1979): 269-276
- Mead Earle, Edward. "American Mission in the Near East," *Foreign Affairs* 7, no. 3 (Apr 1929): 398-417
- Mearsheimer, John J. "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter, 1994-1995): 5-49
- Meiers, Franz-Josef. "The Return of the Imperial Presidency: President, Congress, and U.S. Foreign Policy after 11 September 2001" *American Studies* 55, no. 2 (2010): 249-286
- Meiers, Franz-Josef. "The Return of the Imperial Presidency: The President, Congress and U.S. Foreign Policy," *American Studies* 55, no. 2 (2010): 249-286
- Ned Lebow, Richard. "Woodrow Wilson and the Balfour Declaration," *The Journal of Modern History* 40, no. 4 (December 1968): 501-523
- Nye Jr, Joseph S. "Soft Power," *Foreign policy*, no. 80, (Autumn 1990): 153-171
- Nye, Joseph. "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6, (November/December 2010): 2-12
- Obama, Barack. "Renewing American Leadership", *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007): 2-16
- Ornstein, Norman J. and Thomas E. Mann, "When Congress Checks Out," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 6 (November/December 2006): 67-82
- Painter, David S. "Oil and the American Century," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (June 2012): 24-39
- Rose, Gideon. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, n 1, (October 1998): 144-172
- Rose, Gideon. "Power, Perceptions and the Cold War," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 38, no. 1 (March 1996): 160-167

Rudalevige, Andrew. "The Contemporary Presidency: The Decline and Resurgence and Decline (and Resurgence?)" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (September 2006): 506-524

Silverfarb, Daniel. "Britain, the United States, and the Security of the Saudi Arabian Oilfields in 1942" *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 3, (September 1983): 719-726

Sofaer, Abraham D. "Presidential Power and National Security," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1, Special Issue: Invoking Inherent Presidential Powers (March 2007): 101-123

Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman Kevin Narizny. "Correspondence: Neoclassical Realism and its Critics," *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 193–203

Vitalis, Robert. "Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf" *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 185-213

Walt, Stephen M. "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, No. 110, Special Edition: Frontiers of Knowledge (Spring 1998): 29-32+34-46

Walt, Stephen M. "US Grand Strategy after the Cold War: Can Realism Explain it? Should Realism Guide it?," *International Relations* 32, n. 1, (March 2018): 1–20

Waltz, Kenneth N. "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 5-41

Weiss, Robert. "Imperial Obama- a Kinder, Gentler Empire?" *Social Justice* 37, no. 2/3 (November 2010): 1-9.

Wivel, Anders. "Explaining why state X made a certain move last Tuesday: the promise and limitations of realist foreign policy analysis," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, no 8, (December 2005): 355–380

Zachs, Fruma. "Toward a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria?" *Die Welt des Islams* 41, no. 2 (July 2001): 145-173.

Zakaria, Fareed "The Future of American Power: How America can Survive the Rise of the Rest," *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 3 (May/June 2008): 18-43

Zakaria, Fareed. "Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay," *International Security* 17, no. 1 (Summer, 1992): 177-198

## News and Magazine Articles

Ahmed, Muhammad Idrees. "Barack Obama's presidency will be defined by his failure to face down Assad," *The Guardian*, December 16, 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/17/obama-presidency-defined-failure-face-down-assad-syria>

Al-Gharbi, Musa. "Red Line Drawn with Syrian Blood," *Counterpunch*, August 29, 2013, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/29/red-lines-drawn-with-syrian-blood/>

Alexander, David. "The U.S. General Backed Arming Syrian Rebels 'conceptually'," *Reuters*, February 10, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria/top-u-s-general-backed-arming-syrian-rebels-conceptually-idUSBRE9190CP20130210>

Arango, Tim and Thomas Erdbrink, "U.S. and Iran both Attack ISIS, but They Not to Look Like Allies," *New York Times*, December 3, 2014,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/world/middleeast/iran-airstrikes-hit-islamic-state-in-iraq.html>

Arshad, Mohammed and Andrew Osborn, "Kerry: Syrian Surrender of Chemical Arms Could Stop US Attacks," *Reuters*, September 9, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-kerry/kerry-syrian-surrender-of-chemical-arms-could-stop-u-s-attack-idUSBRE9880BV20130909>

Baker, Peter. "Relief over US Exit from Iraq Fades as Reality Overtakes Hope," June 22, 2014, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/23/world/middleeast/relief-over-us-exit-from-iraq-fades-as-reality-overtakes-hope.html>

Balanche, Fabrice. "The End of the CIA Program in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-08-02/end-cia-program-syria>

Baron, Keven. "How the U.S. Military Sees the Anti-ISIS Fight," *The Atlantic*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/obama-doctrine-military-trump/513470/>

Begley, Sarah. "Read John Kerry's Full Speech on Israeli Settlement and a Two-State Solution," *Time*, December 28, 2016, <http://time.com/4619064/john-kerrys-speech-israel-transcript/>

Black, Ian, and Julian Borger. "Gulf states warned against arming Syrian rebels," *Guardian*, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/05/gulf-states-warning-arming-syria>

Boghani, Priyanka. "Who's Who in the Fight against ISIS," *Frontline*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/whos-who-in-the-fight-against-isis/>

Calli, Enes and Ricky Zipp. "Did the Iran Nuclear Deal Prevent Obama from Entering the Syrian Conflict," *MEDILL News Service*, March 21, 2018, <http://dc.medill.northwestern.edu/blog/2018/03/21/did-the-iran-nuclear-deal-prevent-obama-from-entering-the-syrian-conflict/#sthash.dYjWyCjl.5rmBfAA7.dpbs>

Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. "In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed 'Little Sparta'," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-ua...c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f6aeac18bd34](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-ua...c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html?utm_term=.f6aeac18bd34)

Charbonneau, Louis. "Russia U.N. veto on Syria aimed at crushing West's crusade," *Reuters*, February 8, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-russia/russia-u-n-veto-on-syria-aimed-at-crushing-west-s-crusade-idUSTRE8170BK20120208>

Chollet, Derek. "Obama's Red Line Revisited," *Politico*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059>

Clinton, Hillary. "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

Cooper, Helene. "Obama Enlist 9 Allies to Help in the Battle against ISIS," *New York Times*, September 5, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/06/world/middleeast/us-and-allies-form-coalition-against-isis.html>

Colby, Elbridge A. and Mitchell, Wess. "The Age of Great Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-10/age-great-power-competition>

Cornwell, Susan. "US Senators Cut Funds for Iraq Police Training Program," *Reuters*, May 22, 2012, <https://af.reuters.com/article/egyptNews/idAFL1E8GMDPF20120522>

Crowley, Michael. "Iran might Attack American Troops in Iraq, U.S. Officials Fear," *Politico*, March 25, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/could-iran-attack-us-troops-in-iraq-116365>

DeYoung, Karen. "Syrian rebels get influx of arms with gulf neighbors money, U.S. Coordination," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-reb...05/15/gIQAds2TSU\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.7253406f311c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-reb...05/15/gIQAds2TSU_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7253406f311c)

DeYoung, Karen. "US Evaluating Size of Baghdad Embassy, Officials Say," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-evaluat...ials-say/2012/02/07/gIQABP8axQ\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d1bc0d059ac4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-evaluat...ials-say/2012/02/07/gIQABP8axQ_story.html?utm_term=.d1bc0d059ac4)

Diehl, Jackson. "Obama Foreign Policy Needs an Update," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/21/AR2010112102263.html>

Doherty, Regan, and Amena Bakr. "Exclusive: secret Turkish nerve center leads aid to Syria rebels," *Reuters*, July 27, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-centre/exclusive-s...rkish-nerve-center-leads-aid-to-syria-rebels-idUSBRE86Q0JM20120727>

Drennan, Justine. "Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition against the Islamic State," *Foreign Policy*, November 12, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/12/who-has-contributed-what-in-the-coalition-against-the-islamic-state/>

Dueck, Colin. "US Military Could not Handle One Major Theatre Operation if Sequester Sticks," *Breaking Defense*, September 18, 2013, <https://breakingdefense.com/2013/09/us-military-could-not-handle-one-major-theater-operation-if-sequester-sticks/>

Elgindy, Khaled. "Obama's Record on Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2016-10-05/obamas-record-israeli-palestinian-peace>

Ferguson, Niall. "An Empire at Risk," *Journalism*, December 14, 2009, <http://www.niallferguson.com/journalism/finance-economics/an-empire-at-risk>

Ferguson, Niall. "Wanted: A Grand Strategy for America," *Newsweek*, February 13, 2011, <http://www.niallferguson.com/journalism/politics/wanted-a-grand-strategy-for-america>

Filkins, Dexter. "What we Left Behind," *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/what-we-left-behind>

Fisher, Max. "Obama's cringe-worthy line claiming Middle East conflicts 'date back millennia'" *Vox*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/12/10759008/state-union-address-obama-middle-east-millennia>

Friedersdorf, Conor. "Obama's Weak Defense of His Record on Drone Killings," *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/president-obamas-weak-defense-of-his-record-on-drone-strikes/511454/>

Friedman, Thomas. "Iran and the Obama Doctrine," *New York Times*, April 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html>

Fuller, Matt. "116 House Member Sign Syria Letter to Obama (updated)," *Roll Call*, August 28, 2013, <https://www.rollcall.com/2013/08/28/116-house-members-sign-syria-letter-to-obama-updated/>

Garfinkle, Adam. "Putin, Obama and the Middle East," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October, 2015, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194055/garfinkle\\_-\\_putin\\_obama\\_and\\_the\\_me.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/194055/garfinkle_-_putin_obama_and_the_me.pdf)

Gatehouse, Gabriel. "Iran 'Influenced' Iraq Over US Troops' Exit," *BBC*, November 14, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15724404>

Goldberg, Jeffrey. "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

Gorski, Philip S. & William McMillan, "Barack Obama and American Exceptionalisms," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 24 May, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2012.682513>

Hamid, Shadi and Peter Mandaville, “The U.S. is Giving up on Middle East Democracy—and That’s a Mistake,” *The Atlantic*, January 7 , 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/the-us-is-giving-up-on-middle-east-democracy-and-thats-a-mistake/282890/>

Hamid, Shadi. “How Iraq Warped Obama’s Worldview,” *Brookings*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/12/how-iraq-warped-obamas-worldview/#cancel>

Hamid, Shadi. “Was the Iran Deal Worth it,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/07/iran-nuclear-deal-consequences-obama/398780/>

Hartung, William D. and Ben Freeman, “The Saudi Lobby’s Scheme to Destroy the Iran Deal,” *The American Conservative*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-saudi-lobbys-scheme-to-destroy-the-iran-deal/>

Hertzberg, Hendrik. “Smart Power,” *New Yorker*, January 26, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/26/smart-power>

Hirsh, Michael. “Obama has no Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/03/obama-has-no-doctrine/73171/>

Jeffrey, James F. “Iraq: The Challenging Transition to a Civilian Mission,” *US Department of State*, February 1, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/155827.htm>

Johnson, Keith. “Why American Oil Hasn’t Been a Total Game Changer,” *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2008, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/14/why-american-oil-hasnt-been-a-total-game-changer/>

Kahl, Colin H. “No, Obama didn’t Loose Iraq: What the President’s Critics get Wrong,” *Politico*, June 15, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/no-obama-didnt-lose-iraq-107874>

Kennedy, Paul. “Back to Normalcy: Is America Really in Decline,” December 21, 2010, *New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/79753/normalcy-american-decline-decadence>

Khalaf, Roula, and Abigail Fielding-Smith, “How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution,” *The Financial Times Magazine*, May 17, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de>

Kitchen, Nicholas and Michael Cox, “Obama nation? US foreign policy one year on: driving decline? Economic crisis and the rise of China” *LSE IDEAS*, London School of Economics and Political Science, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43591/>

Korte, Gregory. “Obama Extends post-9/11 state of national emergency,” *USA Today*, 9 September 2019, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/09/09/obama-extends-post-911-state-national-emergency-16th-year/90004960/>



Korte, Gregory. "Obama Issues Executive Orders by another Name," *USA Today*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2014/12/16/obama-presidential-memoranda-executive-orders/20191805/>

Korte, Gregory. "Obama's executive action rollouts increasing in pace," *USA Today*, April 22, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/04/22/obama-executive-actions-increasing/25828391/>

Landler, Martin and Thom Shanker. "Pentagon Lays out Options for US Military Effort in Syria," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/pentagon-out...options-to-congress-suggests-syria-campaign-would-be-costly.html>

Lee, Carol E., Gordon Lubold and Adam Antous. "Obama's Options Narrow in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/obamas-options-narrow-in-syria-1444438099>

Lewis, Smith. "Syria Conflict: West should have listened to Russia, says UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi," *The Independent*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-west-should-have-listened-to-russia-says-un-special-envoy-lakhdar-brahimi-a6927571.html>

Lister, Charles. "Obama's Syria Strategy is the Definition of Insanity," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/21/obamas-syria-strategy-is-the-definition-of-insanity/>

Lizza, Ryan. "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama Foreign Policy," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>

Löfflmann, Georg. "From the Obama Doctrine to America First: the erosion of the Washington consensus on grand strategy," *International Politics*, 20 February 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00172-0>

Löfflmann, George. "The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint: President Obama's Conflicted Grand Strategy in Asia," *Asian Security*, 30 June 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2016.1190338>

Luck, Taylor. "To Counter Iranian Rival, Saudi Arabia Steps up Washington Lobbying," *The Christian Monitor*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/0208/To-counter-Iranian-rival-Saudi-Arabia-steps-up-Washington-lobbying>

Macdonald, Paul K., and Joseph Parent. "The Retrenchment War," *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2014-09-24/retrenchment-war>

Mazzetti, Mark, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A War in Syria," *New York Times*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>

Mazzetti, Mark, and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels," *New York Times*, January 23, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html>

Menon, Rajan. "Beijing and Moscow Balk at 'interference'," *Current History*, 1 November 2012, <https://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/article-abstract/111/748/310/108890>

Miller, Greg. "CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-rampi...84-2af6-11e3-8ade-a1f23cda135e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e283417960c5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-rampi...84-2af6-11e3-8ade-a1f23cda135e_story.html?utm_term=.e283417960c5)

Nakamura, David. "Obama has Spent almost Seven Months of his Presidency on Foreign Travel: He Put his Frequent Filer-Miles where his Mouth was: Asia," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/international-travel-map.html>

Nasr, Vali. "The Inside Story of How the White House Let Diplomacy Fail in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/04/the-inside-story-of-how-the-white-house-let-diplomacy-fail-in-afghanistan/>

Ofek, Hillel. "The Tortured Logic of Obama's Drone War," *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2010, <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-tortured-logic-of-obamas-drone-war>

Putin, Vladimir V. "A Plea for Caution from Russia," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>

Rapier, Robert. "The Irony of President Obama's Oil Legacy," *Forbes*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2016/01/15/president-obamas-petroleum-legacy/#1c075580c10f>

Remnick, David. "The Obama Administration's Final Warning on the Middle East Peace Process," *The New Yorker*, December 28, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-obama-administrations-final-warning-on-the-middle-east-peace-process>

Reuters, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar Funding Syrian Rebels," June 23, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi/saudi-arabia-and-qatar-funding-syrian-rebels-idUSBRE85M07820120623>

Rich, Frank. "the Vietnamization of Bush's Vacation," *New York Times*, August 28, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/28/opinion/28rich.html?pagewanted=1&r=2&>

Rogin, Josh. "Report: State Department's Iraq Police Training Program Being Scaled Back even Further," *Foreign Policy*, July 30, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/07/30/report-state-departments-iraq-police-training-program-being-scaled-back-even-further/>

Rogin, Josh. "White House: We are Returning to a pre-1990 Military Stance in the Gulf," December 16, 2011, *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/16/white-house-we-are-returning-to-a-pre-1990-military-stance-in-the-gulf/>

Rohde, David. "The Obama Doctrine," *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/the-obama-doctrine/>

Rouhani, Hassan. "President of Iran Hassan Rouhani: Time to Engage," *Washington Post*, September 19, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47ebe\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d49b41edff83](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47ebe_story.html?utm_term=.d49b41edff83)

Sanger, David E. "Obama Order Sped up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran," *New York Times*, June 1, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/middleeast/obama-ordered-wave-of-cyberattacks-against-iran.html>

Scharre, Paul and Daniel Burg. "To Save Money go Unmanned," *War on the Rocks*, October 22, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/10/to-save-money-go-unmanned/>

Shanker, Thomas and Lauren D'Acolio. "Former Defense Secretaries Criticize Obama on Syria," *New York Times*, September 18, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/19/world/middleeast/gates-and-panetta-critical-of-obama-on-syria.html>

Shear, Michael D., Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS," *New York Times*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>

Sherman, Wendy. "How We Got the Iran Deal," *Foreign Affairs*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-08-13/how-we-got-iran-deal>

Singer, Peter W. "Military Robots and the Laws of War," *The New Atlantis*, Winter 2009, <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/military-robots-and-the-laws-of-war>

Solomon, Jay and Carol E. Lee. "Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran's Khamenei About Fighting Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>

Steinhauer, Jennifer. "Democrats Hand Victory to Obama on Iran Nuclear Deal," *New York Times*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/us/politics/iran-nuclear-deal-senate.html>

Taddonio, Patrice. "'The President Blinked': Why Obama Changed Course on the 'Red Line' in Syria," *Frontline*, May 25, 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-president-blinked-why-obama-changed-course-on-the-red-line-in-syria/>

Tim Arango, "US Planning to Slash Iraq Embassy Staff by as much as Half," *TheNew York Times*, February 7, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/world/middleeast/united-states-planning-to-slash-iraq-embassy-staff-by-half.html>

Traub, James. "The Mess Obama Left Behind," *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/07/the-mess-obama-left-behind-in-iraq-surge-debate/>

Tyler, Patrick E. "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop a One-Superpower World," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, <http://work.colum.edu/~amiller/wolfowitz1992.htm>

Wehrey, Frederic. "Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/gulf-calculations-in-syrian-conflict-pub-55865>

Wolffe, Richard. "America Can Be A Force [For] Good In The World" *Newsweek*, April 21, 2008, [https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/apps/doc/A177841302/AONE?u=ed\\_itw&sid=AONE&xid=df60b016](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/apps/doc/A177841302/AONE?u=ed_itw&sid=AONE&xid=df60b016).

Younes, Ali and ShafikMandhai, "FSA Rebels: We would have Won if not for Iran," *Al Jazeera*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/fsa-rebels-won-iran-171022110625326.html>

Zakaria, Fareed. "Are America's Best Days Behind Us," *Time*, March 03, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2056723-1,00.html>

Zakaria, Fareed. "Obama Caves to Conventional Wisdom in Syria," *Washington Post*, July 9, 2014, <https://fareedzakaria.com/columns/2014/07/10/obama-caves-to-conventional-wisdom-on-syria>

Zakaria, Fareed. "Obama's Syria Policy is full of contradictions," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2013, <https://fareedzakaria.com/columns/2013/06/19/obamas-syria-policy-is-full-of-contradictions>

Zakaria, Fareed. "The Case against Intervention in Syria," *Washington Post*, June 1, 2012, <https://fareedzakaria.com/columns/2012/06/01/the-case-against-intervention-in-syria>

Zakaria, Fareed. "The Strategist," *Time*, January 30, 2012, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2104842-7,00.html>

Zenko, Micah. "Chuck Hagel Astonishing Admission on Syria," *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/12/chuck-hagel-obama-syria/421293/>

Zenko, Micah. "Obama's Embrace of Drone Strikes Will be a Lasting Legacy," *New York Times*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/12/reflecting-on-obamas-presidency/obamas-embrace-of-drone-strikes-will-be-a-lasting-legacy>

## **Interviews:**

“Interview with Quentin Sommerville, BBC” *U.S. Department of State*, September 13, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/seci/246849.htm>

“Obama on the state of the world: the extended Vox conversation,” *Vox*, February 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=td7Dcsco-WY>

Barack Obama, “Interview with Jon Sopel of BBC,” July 25, 2015, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-jon-sopel-bbc>

Buzan, Barry. ‘The End of Leadership? - Constraints on the World Role of Obama’s America,’ *LSE Ideas*, 2010, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43579/>

Dempsey, Martin E. “Interview with Fareed Zakaria for "GPS" (CNN),” *Joint Chiefs of Staff*, February 19, 2012, <http://www.jcs.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/571847/gen-dempseys-interview-with-fareed-zakaria-for-gps-cnn/>

Jack Goldsmith, “A Sorry Bargain: Weak from the start, the Iran nuclear deal was a fragile political commitment that left Congress out in the cold,” *Hoover Digest*, Sept. 22, 2018, <https://www.hoover.org/research/sorry-bargain>

Krugman, Paul. “In Defense of Obama : The Nobel Prize-winning economist, once one of the president’s most notable critics, on why Obama is a historic success,” *RollingStone*, October 8, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/in-defense-of-obama-171648/>

New York Times, “Exclusive Full Interview: Obama on the World,” 10 August, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnRNszsza\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnRNszsza_8)

NPR, “Transcript: Obama's Speech Against The Iraq War”, January 20, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99591469&t=1542475475472>

Obama, Barack. “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” *The American Presidency Project*, January 27, 2010, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-17>

Obama, Barack. “Interview With Bahman Kalbasi of BBC Persian in New York City .” *The American Presidency Project*, September 24, 2010, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-bahman-kalbasi-bbc-persian-new-york-city>

Obama, Barack. “Interview with Charlie Rose on PBS ‘Charlie Rose,’” *The American Presidency Project*, June 17, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-pbs-charlie-rose>

Obama, Barack. “Interview with Charlie Rose on PBS ‘Charlie Rose’” *The American Presidency Project*, June 17, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-pbs-charlie-rose>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Charlie Rose," *The American Presidency Project*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-0>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Charlie Rose." *The American Presidency Project*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-charlie-rose-0>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Chuck Todd of NBC News 'Meet the Press'" *The American Presidency Project*, September 7, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-chuck-todd-nbc-news-meet-the-press-5>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Fareed Zakaria of CNN's 'GPS'" August 9, 2015, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-fareed-zakaria-cnns-gps>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Franklin Foer and Chris Hughes," January 26, 2013, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-interview-with-franklin-foer-and-chris-hughes>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC's 'This Week'" September 15, 2013, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-george-stephanopoulos-abc-this-week>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of Bloomberg's 'View'" February 27, 2014, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-jeffrey-goldberg-bloombergs-view>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of Bloomberg's 'views,'" *The American Presidency Project*, February 27, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-jeffrey-goldberg-bloombergs-view>

Obama, Barack. "Interview With Justin Webb of BBC World News," June 1, 2009, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-justin-webb-bbc-world-news>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Mika Brzezinski of MSNBC's 'Morning Joe', June 23, 2014, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-mika-brzezinski-msnbc-morning-joe>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Mika Brzezinski of MSNBC's 'Morning Joe,'" *The American Presidency Project*, June 23, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-mika-brzezinski-msnbc-morning-joe>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Nadia Bilbassy-Charters of Al Arabiya News Channel," *The American Presidency Project*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-nadia-bilbassy-charters-al-arabiya-news-channel>

Obama, Barack. "Interview with Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio," the American Presidency Project, December 18, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-steve-inskeep-national-public-radio-1>

Panetta, Leon E. "Remarks by Secretary Panetta at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore," *U.S. Department of Defense*, June 2, 2012, <https://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5049>

Putin, Vladimir. "Answers to Questions from French Journalists from TF1 TV Channel," *Kremlin*, October 12, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/53081>

Putin, Vladimir. "Interview to Anadolu Agency," *Kremlin*, November 28, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/47104>

Putin, Vladimir. "Interview to Bloomberg," *Kremlin*, September 5, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/52830>

Putin, Vladimir. "Interview to German newspaper Bild. Part 2," *Kremlin*, January 12, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/51155>

Putin, Vladimir. "Interview to the Al-Ahram Daily," *Kremlin*, February 9, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/47643>

Stephanopoulos, George. "Full Interview Transcript: President Barack Obama," ABC News, September 15, 2015, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/full-interview-transcript-president-barack-obama/story?id=35203825>

The American Presidency Project, "Interview of President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton with Steve Kroft of CBS's '60 Minutes'," January 27, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-president-obama-and-secretary-state-clinton-with-steve-kroft-cbss-60-minutes>

The American Presidency Project, "Interview with Fareed Zakaria of Time Magazine," January 19, 2012, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/interview-with-fareed-zakaria-time-magazine>

Vladimir Putin, "Interview to American TV channel CBS and PBS," *Kremlin*, September 29, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/50380>

## Websites:

Alterman, John. "Bad Options and Hard Choices in Syria policy," *US House Committee on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2013, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20130605/100938/HHRG-113-FA13-Wstate-AltermanJ-20130605.pdf>

Armitage, Richard and Joseph Nye, Jr, "CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America", *CSIS*, 2010, <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/csissmartpowerreport.pdf>

BBC, "China and Russia Veto UN Resolution Condemning Syria," October 5, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15177114>

BBC, "Syria conflict: Obama rules out ground troops for Syria," April 24, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36121135>

Biddle, Stephan. "Evaluating U.S. Options for Iraq," *CFR*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/report/evaluating-us-options-iraq>

Blanchard, Christopher M. et al. "Change in the Middle East: Implications for US Policy," *CRS*, March 7, 2012, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42393.pdf>, p10.

Blanchard, Christopher M., and Carla E. Humud, "The Islamic State and U.S. Policy," *CRS*, September 15, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf>

Blin, Antony J. "Perspectives on the Strategic Necessity of Iran Sanctions," *U.S. Department of State*, January 27, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/d/2015/236784.htm>

Borshchevskaya, Anna. "Russia's Many Interests in Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 24, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-many-interests-in-syria>

Brake, Bruce. "Report questions drone use, widely unpopular globally, but not in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*, October 23, 2013. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/23/report-questions-drone-use-widely-unpopular-globally-but-not-in-the-u-s/>

Bush, George W. "Address on Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait (August 8, 1990)," *Miller Center*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-5529>

Bush, George W. "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress (September 11, 1990)," *Miller Center*, Virginia University, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-3425>

Bush, George W. Address on the End of the Gulf War (February 27, 1991), *Miller Center*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-5530>

Bush, George. "President Delivers State of the Union Address" *The White House*, January 29, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

Buzas, Zoltan. "How Nationalism Helps Internal Balancing but Hurts External Balancing: The Case of East Asia," *Center for International Peace and Security Studies*, September 19, 2014, p4, [http://gnss.mcgill.ca/files/CIPSS\\_Buzas%20-%20Working%20Paper%2043.pdf](http://gnss.mcgill.ca/files/CIPSS_Buzas%20-%20Working%20Paper%2043.pdf)



Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. “Chart Book: The Legacy of the Great Recession,” June 6, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/economy/chart-book-the-legacy-of-the-great-recession>

Chollet, Derek, Ellen Laipson, Michael Doran, and Michael Mandelbaum, “Does the Middle East still Matter: The Obama Doctrine and U.S. Policy,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/does-the-middle-east-still-matter-the-obama-doctrine-and-u.s.-policy>

Chu, Vivian S and Todd Garvey, “Executive Orders: Issuance, Modification, and Revocation,” *CRS*, April 16, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS20846.pdf>

Clapper, James. “Remarks as Delivered by James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence,” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, February 11, 2014, [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2016-02-09SASC\\_open\\_threat\\_hearing\\_transcript.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2016-02-09SASC_open_threat_hearing_transcript.pdf)

CNN, “Bush makes historic speech aboard warship, Friday, May 2, 2003,” <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript/>

CNN, “Transcript: President Obama’s Speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism,” September 11, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/index.html>

Congressional Budget Office, “Historical Budget Data,” <https://www.cbo.gov/about/products/budget-economic-data#2>

Congressional Budget Office, “Updated Budget Projections,” <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/114th-congress-2015-2016/reports/51384-marchbaselineonecol.pdf>

Cordesman, Anthony H. “U.S. Military Spending: The Cost of Wars,” *CSIS*, July 10, 2017, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170710\\_Cost\\_War\\_AHC.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170710_Cost_War_AHC.pdf)

Cordesman, Anthony H. “US Options in Syria, the Dempsey Letter,” *CSIS*, July 16, 2013, 2013, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-options-syria-dempsey-letter>

Council on Foreign Relations, “Virtual Meeting: CFR Master Class Series With Stephen Sestanovich,” July 7, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/event/virtual-meeting-cfr-master-class-series-stephen-sestanovich>

Courts, Michael J. “State and DOD Face Challenges in Finalizing Support and Security Capabilities,” US Government Accountability Office, June 28, 2012, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/600/591997.pdf>

CRS, “Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State,” December 28, 2016, pp 4-8, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44513/7>

CRS, “The War Powers Resolution: Concepts and Practice,” March 8, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42699.pdf>

Delton, Melissa G. “Defeating the Iranian Threat Network: Options for Countering Iranian Proxies,” *CSIS*, November 29, 2016, [http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/congressional\\_testimony/ts161206\\_Dalton\\_Testimony.pdf](http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/congressional_testimony/ts161206_Dalton_Testimony.pdf)

Doran, Michael. “Obama Embraces Military Intervention in Iraq and Syria—Reluctantly,” *Brookings*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/09/11/obama-embraces-military-intervention-in-iraq-and-syria-reluctantly/#cancel>

Driessen, Grant A. and Megan S. Lynch, “The Budget Control Act: Frequently Asked Questions,” *CRS*, February 23, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44874.pdf>

Eisenhower, Dwight. “Eisenhower Doctrine, 5 January 1957” *Miller Center*, University of Virginia, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-5-1957-eisenhower-doctrine>

Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Seychelles, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei’s Regular Press Conference on September 2, 2013,” September 2, 2013, <http://sc.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1072085.htm>

Feltman, Jeffrey D. “Syria: the Crisis and its Implications,” *US Department of State*, March 1, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/185264.htm>

Ford, Robert S. “Crisis in Syria: The US Response,” *U.S. Department of State*, March 20, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2013/206455.htm>

Frontline, “The Gulf War, Oral History: Richard Cheney,” [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/cheney/2.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/cheney/2.html).

Geisel, Harold W. “Audit of the US Mission Iraq Staffing Process,” *Office of the Inspector General*, August 2013, <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/214910.pdf>

George W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the End of the Gulf War (March 6, 1991),” *Miller Center*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-3430>

Gertler, Jeremiah. “U.S. Unmanned Aerial Systems,” *CRS*, January 3, 2012, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42136.pdf>

GOP, “Public Law 107–40—SEPT. 18, 2001” <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>

Guardian, “‘More than 90%’ of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted ISIS, US says” October 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targeting-isis>

Harrison, Ross. “Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective,” *Aljazeera Center for Studies*, September 2, 2018, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>

Hemenway, Dan. “Chinese Strategic Engagement with Assad’s Syria,” *Atlantic Council*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/chinese-strategic-engagement-with-assad-s-syria>

Hongju Koh, Harold. “How to End the Forever War,” *Oxford Union*, May 7, 2013, <https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/Faculty/KohOxfordSpeech.pdf>

Hongju Koh, Harold. "The Obama administration and International Law," *US Department of State*, March 25, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>

Humud, Carla, Christopher Blanchard and Mary Beth Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," *CRS*, October 13, 2017, 4, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a168ccc4.pdf>

Indyk, Martin. "The Clinton Administration's Approach to the Middle East" *The Washington Institute*, Soref Symposium 1993, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-clinton-administrations-approach-to-the-middle-east>

Indyk, Martin. "The End of the U.S.-Dominated Order in the Middle East," *Brookings*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/03/15/the-end-of-the-u-s-dominated-order-in-the-middle-east/>

Information Clearing House, "PNAC letters sent to President Bill Clinton," January 26, 1998, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article5527.htm>

Information clearing house, "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Recourses for a New Century," September 2000, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/pdf/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>

International Monetary Fund, "GDP based on PPP, share of the world," <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>

Jeffrey, James F. "Behind the US Withdrawal from Iraq," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 2, 2014, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/behind-the-u.s.-withdrawal-from-iraq>

Jones, Bruce. "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region," *Brookings*, 7 January 2019, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP\\_20190107\\_new\\_geopolitics\\_of\\_mena\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP_20190107_new_geopolitics_of_mena_final.pdf)

Jones, Elizabeth. "US Policy towards Syria," *U.S. Department of State*, April 11, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2013/207416.htm>

Kagan, Kimberly. "Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," *Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, September 16, 2015, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/kagan-testimony-09-16-15>

Katzman, Kenneth. "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," *CRS*, October 1, 2014, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4d6f4eb42.pdf>

Kerry, John. "Press Availability on Nuclear Deal with Iran," *U.S. Department of State*, July 14, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/07/244885.htm>

Kerry, John. "Statement on Syria," *U.S. Department of State*, August 30, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm>

Kirby, John. "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room," *U.S. Department of Defense*, August 14, 2014, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606912/>

Krass, Caroline D. "Authority to Use Military Force in Libya," *Office of Legal Counsel*, April 1, 2011, [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/olc/opinions/2011/04/31/authority-military-use-in-libya\\_0.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/olc/opinions/2011/04/31/authority-military-use-in-libya_0.pdf)

Kremlin, "Interview to Channel one and Associated Press News Agency," September 4, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143>

Kremlin, "Meeting with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan," November 22, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56152>

Macmanus, Joseph E. and Elizabeth L. King "United States Activities in Libya," *US Department of State and US Department of Defense*, June, 15, 2011, <https://fas.org/man/eprint/wh-libya.pdf>

Manning, David "The Secret Downing Street Memo," 23 July 2002, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB328/II-Doc14.pdf>

McInnis, Kathleen J. "Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State," *CRS*, August 14, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>

McInnis, Kathleen J. "The Addition of Trainers to Iraq: Background for Congress," *CRS*, June 16, 2015, 3-4, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44073.pdf>

McMahon, Robert. "The Impact of the 110th Congress on U.S. Foreign Policy," *CFR*, December 21, 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/impact-110th-congress-us-foreign-policy>

Middle East Monitor, "John Kerry: Al Assad Presented Obama a Secret Peace Proposal with Israel in 2010," September 5, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180905-john-kerry-al-assad-presented-to-obama-a-secret-peace-proposal-with-israel-in-2010/>

New York Times, "Obama's Speech at Camp Lejeune, N.C.," February 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/us/politics/27obama-text.html>

New York Times, "Text of President Obama's Remarks on Syria," August 31, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/world/middleeast/text-of-president-obamas-remarks-on-syria.html>

Obama, Barack. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," *The American Presidency Project*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-19>

Obama, Barack. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress," *The American Presidency Project*, February 24, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-1>

Obama, Barack. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress," *The American Presidency Project*, February 24, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-1>

Obama, Barack. "Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq," *The American Presidency Project*, August 31, 2010,

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-end-combat-operations-iraq>

Obama, Barack. "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Syria," *the American Presidency Project*, September 10, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-situation-syria>

Obama, Barack. "Commencement Address at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado" *The American Presidency Project*, June 2, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-the-united-states-air-force-academy-colorado-springs-colorado-1>

Obama, Barack. "Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York," *The American Presidency Project*, May 22, 2010, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-the-united-states-military-academy-west-point-new-york-2>

Obama, Barack. "Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York" *American Presidency Project*, May 28, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-the-united-states-military-academy-west-point-new-york-3>

Obama, Barack. "Inaugural Address," *The American Presidency Project*, January 20, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-5>

Obama, Barack. "President Obama's Speech in Cairo: a New Beginning," US Department of State, June 4, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2009/124342.htm>

Obama, Barack. "Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City," *The American Presidency Project*, September 21, 2011, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-3>

Obama, Barack. "Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City," *The American Presidency Project*, September 24, 2013, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-11>

Obama, Barack. "Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City," *The American Presidency Project*, September 23, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-5>

Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy," *the White House*, May 28, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>

Office of the Press Secretary, "Address to the Nation by the President," *The White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/06/address-nation-president>

Office of the Press Secretary, "Address to the Nation by the President," *The White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/06/address-nation-president>

Office of the Press Secretary, “Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August, 21, 2013,” *the White House*, August 30, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30...nt-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>

Office of the Press Secretary, “News Conference By President Obama,” *White House*, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/news-conference-president-obama-4042009>

Office of the Press Secretary, “Press Conference by the President,” *the White House*, March 6, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/press-conference-president>

Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in Joint Press Conference,” *The White House*, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/16/...president-obama-and-prime-minister-cameron-united-kingdom-joint->

Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” *The White House*, November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President in an Address to the Nation on Syria,” *The White House*, September 10, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>

Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Iraq,” *The White House* June 19, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>

Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” *the White House*, August 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>

Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” *the White House*, August 18, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>

Office of the Spokesperson, “US Security Cooperation with Iraq,” *U.S. Department of State*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269040.htm>

Oyez, “Boumediene vs Bush”, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2007/06-1195>

Panetta, Leon. “Submitted Statement on Syria,” *Senate Armed Services Committee*, March 7, 2012, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Panetta%2003-07-121.pdf>

PBS, “Analysis: The Long Reach of a Speech,” <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/axis/axis.html>

Pew Research Center, “America’s Global Image Remains More Positive than China’s,” Chapter 1: Attitudes towards the United States,” July 18, 2013, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/chapter-1-attitudes-toward-the-united-states/>

Pew Research Center, “China Seen Overtaking U.S. as Global Superpower,” July 13, 2011, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/13/china-seen-overtaking-us-as-global-superpower/>

Pew Research Center, “Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America’s Image,” July 14, 2014, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/global-opposition-to-u-s-surveillance-and-drones-but-limited-harm-to-americas-image/>

Pew Research Center, “Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001-2008),” December 18, 2008, <https://www.pewglobal.org/2008/12/18/global-public-opinion-in-the-bush-years-2001-2008/>

Pew Research Center, “Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips,” December 2013, <https://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>

Press Operations “Deputy Secretary of Defense Speech,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, August 5 2014, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/605598/>

Purkiss, Jessica and Jack Serle, “Obama’s covert drone war in numbers: ten times more strikes than Bus,” *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, <https://v1.thebureauinvestigates.com/2017/01/17/obamas-covert-drone-war-numbers-ten-times-strikes-bush/>

Reuters, “Full Text of Obama Speech on National Security, Threat of Terrorism,” December 7, 2015, [https://br.reuters.com/article/us-california-shooting-obama-address-text-idUKKBN0TQ09A20151207](https://br.reuters.com/article/us-california-shooting-obama-address-text/idUKKBN0TQ09A20151207)

Rice, Susan E. “Veto of a UN Security Council Resolution on Syria,” *U.S. Department of State*, October 4, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/rm/2011/175033.htm>

Ripsman, Norrin M. “Neoclassical Realism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, November 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-36>

RTE, “Russia’s 12 UN Vetoes on Syria,” April 11, 2018, <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2018/0411/953637-russia-syria-un-veto/>

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Committee, “Opening Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry,” March 11, 2015, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/kerry-testimony-03-11-15>

Shar, Jeremy M. and Christopher M. Blanchard. “Unrest in Syria and US Sanctions against the Assad Regime,” *CRS*, November 9, 2011, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20111109\\_RL33487\\_4589890a9a2d613892f60b36b4191ac0b6b3b936.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20111109_RL33487_4589890a9a2d613892f60b36b4191ac0b6b3b936.pdf)

Sharp, Jeremy M. and Christopher M. Blanchard, “Armed Conflict in Syria: U.S. and International Response,” *CRS*, June 14, 2013, 3, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20130614\\_RL33487\\_15d32d142c4206ebb45fff142091d667a9b4b7f6.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20130614_RL33487_15d32d142c4206ebb45fff142091d667a9b4b7f6.pdf)

Sherman, Wendy. "U.S. Policy towards Iran," *U.S. Department of State*, May 15, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/us/rm/2013/202684.htm>

Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report," July 30, 2012, [https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001094456/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/July2012/Report - July 2012.pdf#view=fit](https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001094456/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/July2012/Report%20-%20July%202012.pdf#view=fit)

Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report," September 09, 2013, [https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001092420/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/September2013/Report - September 2013.pdf#view=fit](https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/sigir/20131001092420/http://www.sigir.mil/files/quarterlyreports/September2013/Report%20-%20September%202013.pdf#view=fit), p 28.

The American Presidency Project, "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces," June 15, 2009, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-global-deployments-united-states-combat-equipped-armed>

The American Presidency Project, "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces," June 15, 2012, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-deployment-united-states-combat-equipped-armed-forces-0>

The American Presidency Project, "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces," December 11, 2014, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-global-deployment-united-states-combat-equipped-armed-0>

The American Presidency Project, "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Global Deployments of United States Combat-Equipped Armed Forces," December 05, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/letter-congressional-leaders-the-global-deployment-united-states-combat-equipped-armed-4>

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Analysis: After Eight Years in Iraq's Skies, Where Now for US Drones," January, December 14, 2011, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/opinion/2011-12-14/analysis-after-eight-years-in-iraqs-skies-where-now-for-us-drones>

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush," January 17, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush>

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, "The National Military Strategy of the United States of America," *U.S. Department of Defense*, February 8, 2011, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS 2018 National Military Strategy Description.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS%202018%20National%20Military%20Strategy%20Description.pdf)

The Nobel Prize, "Nobel Lecture by Barack H. Obama," December 10, 2009, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/obama/26183-nobel-lecture-2009/>

"The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>



The Washington Post, “Full Text: Obama’s News Conference on the Iran Nuclear Deal,” July 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm\\_term=.7420c337063f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm_term=.7420c337063f)

The Washington Post, “Full Text: Obama’s News Conference on the Iran Nuclear Deal,” July 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm\\_term=.7420c337063f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/15/...ews-conference-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/?utm_term=.7420c337063f)

“Trump’s Foreign Policy Moments 2017-2020,” <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/trumps-foreign-policy-moments>

U.N. Security Council, “Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria That Would Have Threatened Sanctions, Due to Negative Votes of China, Russian Federation,” July 19, 2012, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10714.doc.htm>

U.S. Department of Defense, “Defense Budget Priorities and Choices Fiscal Year 2014,” April 2013, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/DefenseBudgetPrioritiesChoicesFiscalYear2014.pdf>

U.S. Department of Defense, “Quadrennial Defense Review Report,” February 2010, <https://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf>

U.S. Department of Defense, “Quadrennial Defense Review Report,” February 2010, <https://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf>

U.S. Department of Defense, “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense”, (2012). 3, [http://archive.defense.gov/news/defense\\_strategic\\_guidance.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf)

U.S. Department of State, “Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of their Activities during their Presence in Iraq,” <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122074.pdf>

U.S. Department of State, “President Obama Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning,” June 4, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2009/124342.htm>

U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Joint Plan of Actions,” 24 November 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/jpoa.pdf>

U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Major Foreign Holder of Treasury Securities,” <https://ticdata.treasury.gov/Publish/mfh.txt>

U.S. Government Publishing Office, “Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives,” March 26, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/>

US Government Printing Office, “The Situation in Syria: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services US Senate,” March 7, 2012, p20, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg76271/pdf/CHRG-112shrg76271.pdf>

USAID, “US Overseas Loans and Grants, Obligations and Loan Authorizations”, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2009, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2012, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2016, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/IRQ>

Wang, Jackie. "Sen. John Cornyn criticizes 'dysfunctional' Congress, Obama's foreign policy," UWIRE Text, 20 Sept. 2014, 1, *Gale Academic Onefile*, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A383059200/AONE?u=ed\\_itw&sid=AONE&xid=cc7d833d](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A383059200/AONE?u=ed_itw&sid=AONE&xid=cc7d833d).

Washington Post , "President Bush Addresses the Nation, Sept. 20, 2001," [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html)

Weed, Mathew. "Presidential Reference to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force in Publicly Available Executive Actions and Reports to Congress," *CRS*, May 11, 2013, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/pres-aumf.pdf> , p 3

Weiss, Andrew S. and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: the Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>

White House, "Advancing American Energy," <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/energy/securing-american-energy>

White House, "National Security Strategy," May 2010, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2010.pdf>

White House, "Remarks of President Donald J. Trump – As Prepared For Delivery Inaugural Address," January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

White House, "Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States' Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations," December 2016, <https://fas.org/man/eprint/frameworks.pdf>

White House, "The National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform: The Moment of Truth," December 2010, 10-11 [https://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/NationalCommissiononFiscalResponsibilityandReform\\_Dec012010.pdf](https://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/NationalCommissiononFiscalResponsibilityandReform_Dec012010.pdf)

