

# ETUDES HELLENIQUES

# HELLENIC STUDIES

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# Obama's Elusive Foreign Policy "Doctrine" and its Impact on the MENA Region

Konstantinos Lambropoulos\*

## RÉSUMÉ

Depuis sa première inauguration, l'absence d'une «doctrine» en politique étrangère du président américain Barack Obama a fait l'objet d'un débat constant et féroce entre les analystes et les décideurs publics. Bien qu'accusant de sévères critiques de la part des idéalistes acharnés ainsi que de leurs homologues réalistes, l'administration Obama a effectivement opté pour une approche distincte, non doctrinale, du cas par cas pour les affaires internationales. Cette stratégie, qui peut être décrite comme celle de l'engagement et de la persuasion, approuve l'action multilatérale et se fonde sur la nécessité de l'émergence d'un monde multipolaire, post-américain. La grande stratégie d'Obama, met l'accent sur les changements dans la région de l'Asie du Sud-Est, privant ainsi les autres parties du monde, de l'engagement américain total, et plus important encore, les régions du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord (MENA) tourmentées par les réverbérations du «printemps arabe». Ainsi la région MENA subit les conséquences de changements politiques, sociaux et démographiques sans précédent et sera au premier rang des préoccupations internationales de sécurité pour les années à venir, subissant les conséquences d'un éventuel changement dans la politique étrangère américaine.

## ABSTRACT

Even from his first inauguration, US President Obama's lack of a single overarching foreign policy "doctrine" has been the subject of a constant and fierce debate among analysts and policy-makers alike. Despite suffering severe criticism from staunch idealists as well as their realists counterparts, the Obama administration has actually opted for a distinct, non-doctrinal, case-by-case approach to international affairs. This strategy, which can be described as one of engagement and persuasion, endorses multilateral action and it is based on the necessities of the emergence of a multi-polar, post-American world. Obama's grand strategy, puts emphasis on the developments in the Southeast Asia region, thus depriving other parts of the world of total US commitment, most importantly the, plagued by the reverberations of the 'Arab Spring', Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Suffering the consequences of unprecedented political, societal and demographic change, the MENA region will be at the forefront of international security concerns for the coming years, bearing the brunt of a potential shift in US foreign policy.

\* Research Fellow at Hellenic Centre for European Studies (EKEM), Athens, Greece.

## **Introduction**

President Obama's re-election in November 2012, implied the continuity and the consolidation of a serious shift in US' approach to international affairs, already apparent from his first presidency in 2009. Abandoning the doctrinal approach to foreign policy for a pragmatic one, based on a cost-benefit logic, and abstaining from traditional foreign policy divisions and dealing with international crises on an ad hoc basis, Obama sought since assuming the presidency, for a balanced but energetic foreign policy, emphasizing on a style of international leadership that requires broad consensus, favors the build-up of strong alliances and endorses collective action.

This "leading from behind approach"<sup>1</sup> was dictated primarily by Obama's conviction of adjusting US foreign policy commitments to its limited capacities; Furthermore it was imposed by the trends and constraints of the international system and the tectonic changes that have taken place in the global environment:

The emergence of a multi-polar<sup>2</sup> or even non polar, more interdependent world, where after two decades of undisputed US hegemony, US primacy is seriously contested on multiple fronts by rising powers such as China, Russia and India; American economic stringency at a time when international competition for influence and resources has been given new impetus; The US Military's exhaustion, suffering the consequences of overstretch; the public image of the US, especially in the Muslim World, which has reached its lowest point after two inconclusive and costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; Last but not least, large regions of the world, namely the MENA region, have been put under unprecedented political transformation and the security architecture of the Cold-War establishment is disintegrating, threatening international order and regional stability.

Obama's second term administration is faced with serious challenges, both domestic and external, on all fronts, with East Asia, bearing the brunt of his attention, albeit the MENA region and the Eastern Mediterranean in particular, will pose the most immediate and significant threat to international security as it has already been shown during the Arab "Spring" uprisings.

The region itself is plagued by a myriad of security challenges of post-revolution transition which include constant and violent conflict, religious and

sectarian strife, organized crime, human and drug trafficking (the region has become a hub for cocaine trafficking), illegal migration, piracy and environmental threats.

The region, deemed vital for US and Western interests in the Cold War security setting, will be at the forefront of international attention for the coming years. Obama's foreign policy approach exerts a broader influence in this region where insecurity and uncertainty constitute the prevalent trends in a post-revolution security setting.

### **Obama's Foreign Policy in Retrospect: Bridging the Gap between Realism and Idealism**

Obama's distinctive foreign policy approach, has created dissensus among scholars and policymakers alike, regarding the definition of the president's stance in international affairs, as well as the efficacy of the administration's grand strategy and the direct and indirect implications of the absence of a comprehensive US foreign policy doctrine, for US interests and international security and order. Frustrating realists and idealists alike and resisting traditional foreign policy categories and conventional ideological tendencies, Obama opted for a foreign policy of retrenchment and restraint, introducing a case to case<sup>3</sup> foreign policy approach, chose to disregard the either hard power-driven realist or ideological doctrinal one, and embarked on deploying a pragmatic grand strategy of persuasion<sup>4</sup> which appreciated the utility of "smart power"<sup>5</sup> in an interconnected era, supplemented with aspects of an "offshore balancing"<sup>6</sup> strategic concept with regard to his tactics employed.

The shift in US foreign policy was by no means imperceptible. As his 2008 election campaign had already revealed, Barack Obama's election as forty-fourth president entailed major change in US foreign policy and a new chapter in the history of America's international affairs; one adjusted to the arrival of a "post-American world."<sup>7</sup>

There exist however, certain drivers for his decision to introduce this ambitious approach, even it confronted traditional foreign policy norms.

Obama's public record of statements and speeches prior or after his inauguration to the White House, put emphasis primarily on the necessity of the US to adapt to a rapidly changing global environment, characterized by

growing interdependence and interconnectivity, security challenges from terrorism and failed states to climate change, nuclear proliferation and pandemics.

Furthermore the Obama administration's exposure to an inherited series of problems both domestic and external, compromised his foreign policy choices to a large extent. The counter-productive war in Afghanistan, the strategic nuclear threat of North Korea and Iran, the unending Israel-Palestinian conflict, Muslim extremism coupling with a financial crisis of unprecedented magnitude, as well as a disinclined US public to support further foreign policy endeavors<sup>8</sup>, notwithstanding the administration's abiding commitment<sup>9</sup> to preserve and enhance US primacy in the world, obliged the US president to calibrate US foreign policy options to its real capacities.

Obama's more engaged and less combative approach to international affairs was precipitated by the ill-fated grand strategy of his predecessor, who acted in unilateral fashion, overemphasizing American exceptionalism, promoting the singularity of US leadership, a fact that dissuaded other states to jointly contribute to the tackling of the international challenges and favored exclusively hard power politics over the alternative use of soft power instruments regarding foreign policy, depriving the US from essential foreign policy tools, at a time when it was most needed.

Although the US still maintained their supremacy as the strongest single power, it was undoubtedly clear, that they could no longer afford to act unilaterally with regard to the management of the international system. As former US national security advisor Z. Brzezinski argued, "Washington's great task after the Bush years would be to align America with a "global political awakening" in which, for the first time in human history, "all of humanity is politically active".<sup>10</sup>

Obama's response to the shifting international order was the employment of a grand strategy defined, by the terms "persuasion" or "engagement", both elements of a smart power strategy: Persuasion can be interpreted as employing positive and negative inducements to convince or cajole others to change their behavior, as their most rewarding or least harmful course of action. The National Security Strategy (NSS) document of May 2010 defined engagement rather broadly as "the active participation of the United States in relationships beyond US borders."<sup>11</sup>

His engagement strategy was built on three main perceptions: That in order to continue having a strong military support, the US should rebuild their economy, thus the National Security Strategy begins from domestic policies<sup>12</sup>; That the multi - faceted nature of the international threats and challenges demands the heavily investment in alliances and the endorsement of international cooperation and global partnerships based on shared interests, instead of isolation<sup>13</sup>. Moreover the US must undertake a central role in coordinating and enabling such cooperation to grow<sup>14</sup>.

The predominant problem for the Obama administration was how to facilitate strong US leadership in a transitory era of domestic imbalances, fiscal constraints, with minimal legitimacy across the globe, combined with the reluctance of other states allies or not to embark on a common purposeful action. The administration's response was to place continuing importance on five main sets of interlocutors which could be identified as: civilizations, allies, new partners, adversaries and institutions. Obama's engagement strategy encouraged the reinforcement of relationships with key players in the international system such as China, Russia and India, as well as with rising powers such as Brazil, Turkey and Indonesia. He further proposed the reinvigorating of multilateral action through the international institutions like the UN, NATO and G20 that bestowed legitimacy upon collective action; he favored the engagement of US principal adversaries in a mutually respectable manner; while he promoted the restoration of the severely damaged -under the Bush administration- US ethical paradigm.

Strategic engagement under Obama's leadership "redefines international politics as a complex problem-solving exercise<sup>15</sup>. By rendering every stakeholder in the international order, responsible for the solving of international problems, on the basis of shared interests, he tried to alter the parameters of international action, by offering incentives for other powers to exert a greater role in imposing rules of international conduct and thereby, sending clear and unambiguous messages to the entities that violate international law and international conventions, that such conduct would not be tolerated by the broader international community. As the NSS expressly stated, "Rules of the road must be followed, and there must be consequences for those nations that break the rules – whether they are non-proliferation obligations, trade agreements, or human rights commitments."<sup>16</sup>.

Strategic engagement therefore applied to the international order's shifting tectonics, recognizing America's precarious position in the international field. A more modest US foreign policy was deemed imperative in a post-American world. Consequently Obama opted for smart power strategy in contrast of the transformational diplomacy<sup>17</sup> used by his predecessor, favored vigorous diplomacy over single military action, engaging the principal actors in the international system, addressing traditional allies as well as long-established adversaries and, moreover, appealed to civil societies and governments regardless of their standing as friends or foes. Last but not least, Obama embraced certain aspects of the tactics of "Offshore Balancing" policy, regarding the defense of US interests across the globe. Containment of potential hostile powers would be achieved by the preponderance of air and naval power over land warfare and the building and strengthening of a string of military offshore bases to countries which would act as a counterweight to US adversaries<sup>18</sup>.

While no American administration, either Democrat or Republican, would completely discard the promotion of democracy and liberal idealism, nevertheless such an agenda was clearly subordinate to concrete security concerns. However, it is quite debatable that Obama turned completely to realism as the idealist strains, imposed by international events have been apparent throughout his first term administration. His approach should better be defined as pragmatic.

Realist or not, he is considered by his followers the one qualified to bridge the gap between traditional political lines, thus introducing a bridge-building approach, combining aspects of realism with liberal values, taking a stance, inspired by his days as a community organizer in Chicago while he adjusted his foreign policy principles to his instinct, personality and style. According to Colin Dueck: "Obama's most fundamental instincts seem to be not so much realist as accommodationist<sup>19</sup>."

### **The MENA region: Current Strategic Trends and the Limits of American Power**

The seismic shift that has transformed the broader Middle East and North Africa region, cannot be limited to just the "Arab Spring" and its aftermath. Two other trends are proving catalytic to the region's future: the prospect of a

nuclear-armed Iran and the “retreat” of the United States as part of their “leading from behind” approach and their prioritization of the “Pacific Pivot”.<sup>20</sup>

The Arab Spring revolutions clearly indicate that instead of democracy, they could result in bringing up Salafist rule. Furthermore the corrupt Arab nationalist regimes that were brought to power by the end of European colonialism are nearing their end, as their lack of legitimacy condemns their future.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s durability in spite of the economic sanctions and internal strife could prove decisive in the struggle for regional dominance. Apart from the opaqueness of its nuclear program, Iran’s influence in Syria, Lebanon and the Palestine is rising due to the vast Shiite population in these countries, reinforced nonetheless by sectarian strife in those areas as a result of the Arab Spring.

The most important trend that may prove vital to the geostrategic balance in the region is undoubtedly the US decision under the Obama administration to avoid any direct involvement in MENA affairs due to economic constraints, limited resources and as part of Obama’s strategy design. Although Obama stressed the importance of the MENA region for US interests in his famous Cairo speech,<sup>21</sup> since then, there’s been a series of events—the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the “leading from behind” campaign in Libya, where the EU was endorsed by the US to intervene, the call for Bashar al Assad to step down from his authority,”<sup>22</sup> the “Pacific pivot,” defense budget spending cuts—that clearly mark a turn in US foreign policy priorities: The Middle East remains high on the agenda for the US, but loses in importance to the East Asia theater.

A return to pre-1979 “offshore balancing” policy is imminent. For the foreseeable future, Obama regards the U.S. military incapable of inflicting regime change or battling counterinsurgency but still capable to cause critical damage to any opponent. His famous declaration regarding the tide of war,<sup>23</sup> underpinned the fact that the United States would no longer be able to assume the directing role it had previously enjoyed in the greater Middle East as it lacks the sufficient military means to do so, due to the military overstretch of the previous years and the likelihood of further austerity measures in the defense budget of 2014.



## **What Lies ahead: Implications of a Possible US Extrication from the MENA Region**

US extrication from the MENA region would not go unnoticed. As the Cold War security setting is crumbling, the US would find it difficult to shape agendas and outcomes in the region. It is most likely that this conflict-prone region would suffer the consequences of a Hobbesian regional chaos, in which a mixture of ethnic, religious, national, regional, and international actors correlate in order to form new geostrategic geometrical schemes that would alter regional balance. Old regional rivalries such as Egypt against Israel could regain prominence while the forming of new geostrategic alliances is well under way, with the Shiite axis under Iranian supremacy to invite reciprocal action by the Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. There, the United States would find itself operating in the sidelines, monitoring the situation from a distance, unable eventually to safeguard regional stability.

Fewer US presence would certainly create a security vacuum which would induce regional powers such as Iran and Turkey or radical Islamist networks to take advantage of US frailty, leading to further instability as the case of Libya demonstrated. The disintegration of Syria its (“Lebanonization”) could lead to a territorial struggle among Iran, Turkey, and Syria itself, while a potential Syrian spillover could endanger Israel while its effects would reach Jordan and Egypt, threatening an all out war in the region.

US influence in the region is waning and the Pacific Pivot would make matter worse in that aspect. This may cause the resurgence of Al-Qaida and other radical Islamist networks as the Mali case pointed out. Furthermore an assertive and Islamic Turkey, considered itself as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, would create new sources of regional disorder. In addition to Turkish hostile attitude against Greece and Cyprus in the Mediterranean basin, long-standing territorial disputes between Ankara and the Kurdish part of Iraq could flare up. Those pressures could strengthen nationalist and expansionist voices in Ankara that call for establishing a “Greater Turkey,” especially at a time when the European membership bid is no longer part of Ankara’s plans.

There are serious doubts about US support of the Syrian opposition as part of US President’s leading from behind approach. A Syria under the rule of radical Islamic warlords with an inclination to wage jihadist war would be catastrophic for regional order as the Afghanistan case pointed out.

## Obama's Second Term Reaction

The second term Obama administration will not differ much from the first, regarding its grand strategy. Obama seems determined to abstain from new military entanglements abroad and focus instead on domestic rebuilding. His administration ushered in a form of limited military engagement that relied on alliances with key regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Pakistan to share the burden. Obama clearly is unwilling to launch a potentially open-ended war against Iran, dissuading Israel for launching a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear installations. He would probably opt for a compromise with Iran that would prevent any unintended conflict.

The cautious approach, demonstrated in the Syria case will probably remain the prevalent pattern of US behavior in the region, even though the US president remains the recipient of harsh critiques from Human Rights activists and pro-intervention advocates. The economic reform of the MENA region certainly constitutes one of Obama's second-term priorities. However, austerity and reluctance of the US public to foreign aid would seriously undermine any substantial effort.

Although the MENA region issues, like the Middle East Peace Process, the proliferation of WMD and the maintenance of stable relations with the region's stakeholders will definitely be part of Obama's second term agenda, his primary focus will still be the Asia Pacific region.

### NOTES

1. See Lizza, Ryan, «The Consequentialist», *The New Yorker*, 2/5/2011, p. 55.
2. For the view of non-polarity, see Haass, Richard, «The Age of Non-Polarity», *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, May/June 2008.
3. Lizza Ryan, «The Consequentialist», *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, p. 55.
4. See *National Security Strategy May 2010*, 11, at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).
5. Smart power in international affairs is about the combination of hard power and soft power strategies. It is defined by CSIS as “an approach that underscores the necessity

- of a strong military, but also invests heavily in alliances, partnerships, and institutions of all levels to expand American influence and establish legitimacy of American action.” See “CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America”. 12/April 2012. The origin of the term has been attributed to both Joseph Nye and Susanne Nossel respectively. See Joseph Nye, “Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power”, *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, 2009; Nye Joseph, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs, New York, 2004, p. 32; Suzanne Nossel, “Smart Power”, *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, 2004.
6. Offshore balancing is a strategic concept according to the realist view of international affairs, that permits a great power to use its regional allies as a counterweight to the rise of potential hostile powers. It arguably gives the opportunity to a great power to avoid the costs of large military deployments around the world. It was primarily used during the 30s and the Cold War between the two superpowers. For more on offshore balancing, see John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Norton, New York, 2001 and Stephen M. Walt, “Offshore Balancing: An Idea Whose Time has Come”, *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.
  7. Zakaria Fareed, *The Post-American World*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2011.
  8. Based on the research by the Pew Research Center/Council on Foreign Relations, 2009, pp 3–4.
  9. *National Security Strategy May 2010*, 9, at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).
  10. Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Superpower*, Basic Books, 2008.
  11. *National Security Strategy May 2010*, 11, available at: [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf)
  12. *National Security Strategy May 2010*, p.9, at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).
  13. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, Speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, September 8, 2010).
  14. Steinberg, James B., US Deputy Secretary of State, cited in “Global Strategic Review,” “Global Security Governance and the Emerging Distribution of Power,” Geneva, Switzerland, September 10–12, 2010, IISS News, September 2010.
  15. *National Security Strategy, May 2010*, 11, available at: [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).
  16. *National Security Strategy, May 2010*, 3, available at:

[http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).

17. Transformational Diplomacy is the diplomacy initiative undertaken by by former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for reinvigorating US Foreign Policy. For an extensive analysis on transformational diplomacy see “Transformational Diplomacy”, United States, Department of State, (Press release 18/1/2006).
18. See S.M. Walt, *Offshore Balancing*.
19. Dueck Colin, (1/10/2011). «The Accomodator: Obama’s Foreign Policy», *The Hoover Institution, Policy Review*, No 169.
20. US President B. Obama’s Speech in the Australian Parliament defined the Asia Pacific region as a US top priority, Canberra, Australia, 2 November 2011.
21. US President B. Obama’s Speech in Cairo, Egypt, referred to the importance of the Muslim World for the US, 4 June 2009.
22. US President B. Obama’s Speech in Tel Aviv, Israel referred to the necessity of the Syrian President to resign his commission, 21 March 2013.
23. US President B. Obama’s Speech in Afghanistan about the receding of the tide of the war, 23 June 2011.