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## **Interventionism in US Foreign Policy from Bush to Obama**

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### Introduction

This chapter considers the evolution of US policy and practice towards foreign military intervention under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and in terms of strategic intent finds no evidence of substantive change.

Although the language of the 'Global War on Terror' has been replaced by one of a 'transnational global conflict' the underlying policy drivers remain the same: America's security and related interests continue to shape its foreign policy and provide the justification for an exceptionalist interpretation of international law, to the disappointment of those who hoped Obama's election would usher in a new era of strengthened global norms. However, a change in US official thinking is evident in a greater appreciation of the limitations of certain forms of intervention, and in the emergence of alternative policy instruments to deliver US strategic objectives.

### Background

9/11 obliged the US to rethink its approach to homeland security. For the first time since Pearl Harbor America was attacked on its own territory and this

time not by a hostile state power deploying conventional military means but by a non-state actor using violence to achieve political objectives. Initially supported by the vast majority of states at the UN and elsewhere, the Bush Administration passed up the opportunity to treat its attackers as international criminals to be pursued by judicial means and instead launched the 'Global War on Terror'. This included large-scale expeditionary warfare in the Middle East and West Asia, harnessing the full might of US military and technological power. Following early success in Afghanistan, which had given shelter to the Al Qaeda organisation that had claimed responsibility for 9/11, Bush allowed himself to be distracted by Iraq. The resulting quagmire in Iraq, the gradual descent - largely through neglect - of Afghanistan into an equally intractable mess, plus the emergence of new threats in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere, provided a difficult inheritance for Barack Obama when he took over as President in January 2009.

Even before Bush left office there were important voices within his Administration questioning the over-reliance on military means to secure complex foreign and security policy objectives. Robert Gates, Bush's Secretary of Defense following the departure of Donald Rumsfeld, drew attention to the growing imbalance between military and civilian budgetary allocations in the external actions of the United States. Calling for greater investment in so-called 'soft power' Gates said:

'What is clear to me is that there is a need for a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security – diplomacy,

strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development. ...One of the most important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win: economic development, institution-building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, providing basic services to the people, training and equipping indigenous military and police forces, strategic communications, and more – these, along with security, are essential ingredients for long-term success.’ (Gates 2007)

It is worth noting that Gates’ remarks apply only to how the US should intervene internationally, and do not challenge whether it is right for the US to intervene in the first place. Nevertheless his retention by Obama when the latter formed his first Cabinet gave some encouragement to those looking for a new approach on the grounds that the ‘War on Terror’ was causing significant damage to the US's moral credibility in the world and to global security generally.

These hopes were also founded on Obama's profile and speeches as a candidate. As Chapter 1 also argues, his victory against Senator McCain seemed to promise a new approach to international relations, informed among other things by his greater exposure to and understanding of the way the rest of the world thought and behaved, compared to Bush. However a closer examination of Obama the candidate's speeches suggests that this may have reflected more what many in his audience - certainly outside the US - wanted

to hear than what he was willing, or at least able, to say. Furthermore, what he said as a candidate is very much in line with what he did in the early part of his Presidency.

The structure of this chapter will be, first, to review the content of Obama's early speeches in order to discern his policy orientation; second, to consider the instruments he has used to deliver his policy; third to examine the particular test of his position provided by the 2011 Libya crisis; and finally to assess the long-term significance of the 'Obama Doctrine' that this analysis reveals.

### Obama's Early Policy Positions

This section looks in more detail at Obama's statements on foreign policy and security from the time he announced his candidacy in February 2007 to his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December 2009.

We shall see that during this early period there was a consistent thread to Obama's pronouncements on foreign and security policy. In differentiating himself from Bush he was highly critical of the war in Iraq, which he had consistently opposed, as well as the conduct – although not the principle – of the war in Afghanistan. He accused Bush of presiding over the abuse of American values in, for example, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo and of failing to build strong alliances with other nations who shared those values. He firmly

rejected the false choice between liberty and security, between safety and ideals. He argued that complex problems in places like Afghanistan and Iraq needed more than a military response, calling for more diplomacy and for the harnessing of all elements of national power to a common purpose.

On the other hand – and significantly in this context - he was as robust as Bush in his commitment to defend national interests, using force if necessary and reserving the right to act unilaterally. He was not shy of saying the US was at ‘war’ with extremists, who had to be confronted; the nation’s security was at stake. His posture on intervention generally was forward-leaning; he argued that this was a matter of enlightened self-interest based on the premise that US lives were safer if others’ lives were safer too. He repeatedly affirmed the role of the US as a source of progress and as underwriting global security.

Thus, in his speech in Springfield, Illinois, announcing his candidacy (Obama 2007a), he was highly critical on Iraq, dismissing the idea that ‘tough talk and an ill-conceived war can replace diplomacy, and strategy, and foresight’, and adding ‘It’s time to admit that no amount of American lives can resolve the political disagreement that lies at the heart of someone else’s civil war’. However on 9/11 and counterterrorism he did some pretty tough talking himself:

‘Most of all, let’s be the generation that never forgets what happened on that September day and confront the terrorists with everything we’ve

got...We can work together to track terrorists down with a stronger military, we can tighten the net around their finances, and we can improve our intelligence capabilities.'

In other words, he might be critical of Bush's wars, but he was not in any way going to allow himself to be portrayed as soft on terrorism. Then, in August 2007 at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington he gave a wide-ranging and comprehensive foreign policy speech (Obama 2007b) which, significantly, started by referring to 9/11. It showed, he said, that 'in a new world of new threats, we are no longer protected by our own power'. It offered an opportunity 'to devise new strategies and build new alliances, to secure our homeland and safeguard our values, and to serve a just cause abroad'. But Bush had missed the opportunity, with disastrous consequences:

'Instead, we got a color-coded politics of fear. Patriotism as the possession of one political party. The diplomacy of refusing to talk to other countries. A rigid 20<sup>th</sup> century ideology that insisted that the 21<sup>st</sup> century's stateless terrorism could be defeated through the invasion and occupation of a state. A deliberate strategy to misrepresent 9/11 to sell a war against a country that had nothing to do with 9/11.'

In place of this, he offered a new approach:

'When I am President, we will wage the war that has to be won, with a comprehensive strategy with five elements: getting out of Iraq and on to the right battlefield in Afghanistan and Pakistan; developing the capabilities and partnerships we need to take out the terrorists and the

world's most deadly weapons; engaging the world to dry up support for terror and extremism; restoring our values; and securing a more resilient homeland.'

Note his willingness to 'take out' terrorists; later in the speech he developed this further:

'The second step in my strategy will be to build our capacity and our partnerships to track down, capture or kill terrorists around the world, and to deny them the world's most dangerous weapons. I will not hesitate to use military force to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to America...I will ensure that our military becomes more stealthy, agile, and lethal in its ability to capture or kill terrorists.'

He also acknowledged the need to develop civilian capacity, bringing together personnel from the State Department, the Pentagon, and USAID in order to win hearts and minds in post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction, and in addition to invest significantly in counter-terrorism co-operation with other countries. He committed himself to a greater emphasis on diplomacy, saying 'the lesson of the Bush years is that not talking does not work'. He also promised that 'the days of compromising our values are over', that 'America will reject torture without exception' and that he would close Guantanamo, end Military Commissions, and adhere to the Geneva Conventions. Finally, and emphatically, he rejected the 'false choice' between liberty and security and

said that he would 'track and take out the terrorists without undermining our Constitution and our freedom'.

In retrospect what is most striking about this speech is the balance Obama struck between wanting to display a more sophisticated view of the world than Bush had while continuing to profess a steely determination to 'take out' the terrorists where necessary. Whether the latter stemmed from his personal conviction or the need to play to the gallery it was a determination that became more apparent as his presidency progressed.

Although his Inaugural Address (Obama 2009a) gave priority to economic matters, on foreign and security policy Obama again balanced continuity with Bush on terrorism ('Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred') with a further affirmation of the importance of being true to American values ('As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals'). He also offered the hand of friendship to those nations, particularly in the Muslim world, with whom there had been little dialogue under Bush.

In accordance with a campaign promise, Obama followed this up in June 2009 with a speech at Al-Azhar University in Cairo (Obama 2009b). His stated aim was to reach out to Muslims across the world, and his speech combined a well-informed tribute to Islam's role in world history with an apparently heartfelt offer of collaboration from America. He dealt with the thorny issues of the Israeli/Palestinian issue, nuclear weapons, democracy, religious freedom,



women's rights, and economic development and opportunity. But his very first issue was 'violent extremism in all its forms' and he made clear that America would 'relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security...it is my first duty as President to protect the American people.'

Again, he was not afraid to reveal the iron fist underneath the velvet glove, even in this politically delicate setting.

During his first year as President, Obama faced the challenge of deciding how to address the war in Afghanistan, one he had said he believed was just but which to most observers was looking increasingly unwinnable. After an intensive round of discussions with his senior military and civilian advisers, he finally announced, in a speech at West Point Military Academy, a 'surge' of 30,000 additional US troops 'to seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan' after 18 months (Obama 2009c). His justification repeated many of the points from earlier speeches: the US was at 'war' in Afghanistan, 'our security is at stake', it was 'in our vital national interest' to reinforce in the way proposed. Obama also reminded his audience that the Joint Resolution of both Houses of Congress Authorising the Use of Military Force (AUMF), approved on 18 September 2001 (United States Congress 2001) - which gave the President extraordinarily broad powers to use force against those deemed to have been involved in the attacks of 9/11 in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States - was still in force.

A few days after making this announcement Obama was in Oslo to accept the Nobel Prize for Peace. He managed to joke about the irony of the fact that he was receiving this honour as the leader of a nation fighting two wars but also took the opportunity to mount a robust justification of American action to defend itself (Obama 2009d):

'I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people...I, like any head of state, reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation.'

He acknowledged the importance of international law and standards of conduct but stated that he was willing to consider preventive action to protect human rights or to preserve regional security:

'Nevertheless, I am convinced that adhering to standards, international standards, strengthens those who do, and isolates and weakens those who don't... And this becomes particularly important when the purpose of military action extends beyond self-defense or the defense of one nation against an aggressor. More and more, we all confront difficult questions about how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their own government, or to stop a civil war whose violence and suffering can engulf an entire region.'

He also affirmed the US's role as a guarantor of international peace and security on the basis of enlightened self-interest:

‘The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms... We have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will. We have done so out of enlightened self-interest - because we seek a better future for our children and grandchildren, and we believe that their lives will be better if others' children and grandchildren can live in freedom and prosperity.’

### Obama's Policy Instruments

This review of Obama's public statements, both as a candidate and as an early first term president, reveals him to be consistently hawkish on his right to ‘take out’ terrorists, to intervene proactively to make the world a safer place for Americans ,and to act unilaterally if necessary. Although the phrase ‘Global War on Terror’ was quietly dropped (Washington Post 2009), and the Administration started talking instead of ‘overseas contingency operations’ (and subsequently of being engaged in a ‘transnational global conflict’) Obama appeared to have no inhibitions about using the language of ‘war’.

Having inherited wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, his main challenge was how to exit from both. He had always seen Iraq as ‘a dumb war, a rash war’ where the US had allowed itself to be drawn into a sectarian conflict (Obama 2007b). Although he did not take this view about Afghanistan he nevertheless understood that there had to be limits to America's military involvement there.

From a starting position that America simply needed to operate more intelligently e.g. by investing more in economic and political reconstruction, it seems to have become increasingly apparent to Obama that the policy itself was over-ambitious and that a new approach was needed, not least for budgetary reasons. Hence the 'surge' announced in December 2009 was coupled with the promise of early withdrawal.

In parallel there was evidence of Al Qaeda regrouping and posing a new threat from bases in, among other places, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. This posed a new challenge and a test for his approach. One of the main elements of his response was the policy of targeted killings of terrorist suspects, including using unmanned aerial vehicles - or drones - in all three countries. This is the subject of chapter 9 so suffice it to say here that it should not surprise anyone, given Obama's previous remarks, that he was willing to take such an approach. However it did require the Administration to stretch the definition of the AUMF to cover military or CIA action against targets away from war zones in which Americans were fighting; to support this it was claimed that America was involved in a 'transnational global conflict', which justified the application of the rules of war even in areas where US forces were not engaged in combat operations. Interestingly, given Obama's previous openness on the subject of 'taking out the terrorists' it was only in 2012, following an admission by Obama himself in an online video discussion, that the Administration acknowledged publicly that the policy of targeted killings existed and sought to justify it in the way described above (BBC News

2012). This justification remains highly contested within US legal circles as well as internationally (see for example Burt and Wagner 2012; Solis 2012).

However, it was not only through large-scale expeditionary warfare and the use of drones that the Obama administration sought to intervene to build up its global counterterrorism capability and to preserve US security. In two other areas - the deployment of Special Forces overseas and the use of civilian assets alongside military ones in what he termed 'economic and political reconstruction missions' (Obama 2007b) - Obama both built on but also gave a new emphasis to the practice established by his predecessor.

According to official figures (Feickert 2011), in the decade since 9/11 the number of US Special Forces nearly doubled, the budget nearly tripled, and overseas deployments quadrupled. Various estimates had Special Forces present in upwards of 70 countries. Their most spectacular and high-profile achievement under Obama was of course the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, a key event in demonstrating to the American public the legitimacy and effectiveness of the continuing counter-terrorism campaign.

Meanwhile, as noted above, under Bush investment had decreased in what Robert Gates had called 'civilian instruments of national security'; so much so that by 2006 the ratio between spending on defence and all forms of foreign assistance, including the full costs of USAID and the State Department, had reached 17:1. In parallel an increasing amount of development assistance was being channelled through the military, including, for example, through the

newly-established combatant command for Africa, AFRICOM, which was designed to channel large amounts of aid to communities in potentially troublesome areas in order to win hearts and minds (Aaronson 2009:115). As we have seen, Obama the candidate was enthusiastic about upgrading civilian capacity in international operations and achieving better integration of defence, development, and diplomacy (the so called '3D' approach). He was also committed to more and better aid as part of building global security.

As President, in September 2010 he issued a Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development (Department of State 2010), the first ever by a US Administration, and by the time of his proposed Presidential Budget for 2013 the ratio between the defence and foreign assistance budgets had shifted to just over 10:1 (Department of State 2012). Thus Obama could legitimately claim to have upgraded US civilian capacity and capability; indeed the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, which in 2006 had issued a Peer Review report on US foreign aid that was critical about the increasing reliance on the military (OECD 2006), in 2011 issued a report that was much more positive, commending the Administration for its 'determination to renew its global leadership on development' and 'creating a positive dynamic which raises high expectations among US stakeholders and partners' (OECD 2011).

Thus, while adopting an uncompromising counterterrorism agenda that to many critics appeared to take considerable liberties with international law, and also continuing to step up America's global infrastructure in order to be able to

deal at source with what it saw as the root causes of terrorism, Obama could reasonably claim to have promoted a more joined up approach to foreign and security policy and to have restored some of the balance between military and other forms of intervention that had been lost under Bush. These changes notwithstanding, arguments continue about the appropriate use of development assistance in supporting a national security agenda, and who should have the final say on where and how development budgets are spent (Atlantic Council 2010). It is too early to tell whether Obama's new emphasis on civilian instruments of national power reflects a genuine rethink about the rationale for intervention by the US, or is merely tinkering with the way it is carried out.

### Obama and 'Humanitarian Intervention'

As we have seen, in his 2009 Nobel Prize speech Obama had talked about the 'difficult questions about how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their own government, or to stop a civil war whose violence and suffering can engulf an entire region', in other words the vexed question of 'humanitarian intervention'. This was in the context of the adoption in 2005 by the UN General Assembly of the principle of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P), first put forward in 2001 but temporarily sidelined by the events of 9/11 (United Nations 2005). Bill Clinton's presidency had included the ignominious failure of the intervention in Somalia in 1993, followed by the shocking failure to prevent the genocide in Rwanda a year later. The 1999 military intervention in Kosovo, although ultimately successful, had been carried out without a UN

Security Council resolution and was therefore at best 'illegal but legitimate' (Kosovo Report 2000). Despite the existence of R2P, under Bush the US, weakened in its moral authority by its war in Iraq, had failed to intervene effectively to prevent what it itself labelled 'genocide' in Darfur. It was therefore not at all clear how Obama would react should a similar situation arise in future.

This question remained hypothetical for the first two years of Obama's presidency, until the events of the Arab Spring at the turn of 2010/11. In Tunisia and Egypt the Administration, like pretty well everyone else, appeared to have been caught by surprise and to be uncertain how to respond to the popular uprising against the regime in each country. Nevertheless, particularly in Egypt where the US had extremely strong links with the all-powerful military, Obama's cautious approach appeared to be justified by the eventual outcome. On 11 February, the day President Mubarak stood down, Obama was able to appear statesmanlike by welcoming the transition to a new era without having had to risk any evident political capital by being seen to be helping to overthrow the previous regime (Obama 2011a).

However, when just five days later riots broke out in the Libyan city of Benghazi in protest against the regime of Col Gaddafi, Western leaders including Obama were faced with a much more pressing challenge. Gaddafi's initial response was uncompromising and given his known willingness to use brutal violence against his own people there was a real possibility of mass atrocity crimes that would be difficult to ignore if R2P meant anything. Nevertheless



Obama was cautious in his initial response; his first comments urged the Libyan government to show restraint; he subsequently condemned the use of force, and on 23 February he said the Libyan government 'must be held accountable for its failure to meet those responsibilities, and face the cost of continued violations of human rights.' (Obama 2011b)

Only after the strongly worded UN Security Council Resolution 1970 of 26 February (United Nations 2011a) that the US had helped to draw up, which included sanctions against the regime and a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) - effectively ruling out the possibility of a negotiated end to the violence - did he allow himself to call for Gaddafi's departure. According to the White House's account of his conversation on 26 February with German Chancellor Angela Merkel:

'The President stated that when a leader's only means of staying in power is to use mass violence against his own people, he has lost the legitimacy to rule and needs to do what is right for his country by leaving now.' (Obama 2011c)

But, predictably, Gaddafi did not step down. After some initial successes by the insurgents he seemed to be fighting back; by the middle of March he was on the verge of entering Benghazi and was making particularly unpleasant threats about the violence he would inflict on anyone who resisted him.

Faced with this, and encouraged by support from the Arab League and other regional organisations, on 17 March the US and allies secured a second Security Council resolution – SCR 1973 – (United Nations 2011b), which established a no-fly zone over Libya and effectively authorised military action from the air without the presence of foreign troops on the ground. Although Obama was determined that the brunt of the operation should be borne by the European allies who had requested it, and that the US should play a supporting role, it was clear that it would only be possible with a major commitment from the American military. Shortly afterwards U.S. warplanes were in action alongside French and British ones at the start of what would turn out to be a six-month aerial bombing campaign that lasted until Gaddafi was captured and killed and a new regime could take over in Tripoli.

Thus Obama, while still trying to extricate the US from two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, had allowed himself to become involved in a third over Libya. On 28 March, speaking from the National Defense University in Washington, he addressed the American people by television to explain and justify his actions (Obama 2011d). It was a confident speech and very much in line with his earlier statements examined above.

Obama was careful to justify intervention with reference both to fundamental values and to national security interests:

‘For generations, the United States of America has played a unique role as an anchor of global security and as an advocate for human

freedom. Mindful of the risks and costs of military action, we are naturally reluctant to use force to solve the world's many challenges. But when our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act.'

He stressed the limited nature of intervention, both in terms of its scope and duration, the fact that the US was sharing the burden with its partners and allies, and that NATO was in the lead. Mindful of the danger of being seen to become embroiled in a new foreign war he repeated the moral case for intervention, accepting that the US could not always intervene when repression occurred in a distant land, and would have to 'measure our interests against the need for action'. But, he insisted, 'That cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what's right.'

Referring to the strong moral case for action, regional and international support including the UN mandate, and 'the ability to stop Gaddafi's forces in their tracks without putting American troops on the ground' Obama argued:

'To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and more profoundly our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action.'

He also addressed the thorny issue of 'regime change', acknowledging that there were many who suggested that the United States should 'broaden our military mission beyond the task of protecting the Libyan people, and do whatever it takes to bring down Gaddafi and usher in a new government.' However he reminded his audience that this was not in accordance with the mandate provided by the Security Council resolution and further would carry significant additional risks for the US:

'If we tried to overthrow Gaddafi by force, our coalition would splinter. We would likely have to put U.S. troops on the ground to accomplish that mission, or risk killing many civilians from the air. The dangers faced by our men and women in uniform would be far greater. So would the costs and our share of the responsibility for what comes next.

To be blunt, we went down that road in Iraq.'

This was Obama drawing a clear line in the sand and demarcating his Libyan intervention from those previously undertaken in Afghanistan and Iraq. Not only was the restriction to an air campaign safer and less costly, it also minimised the likelihood that the US would be drawn into post conflict reconstruction and 'nation building', with all the potential for unanticipated difficulties that had been encountered in previous campaigns. But interestingly, in his preamble to his remarks about Libya, he referred to 'going after Al Qaeda all across the globe'. In other words, he was making it clear that the light footprint of targeted killings from a safe distance had replaced the quicksand of nation building, and that grandiose ambitions to spread

democracy across the Middle East had been replaced by 'surgical strikes' to defend essential US security interests whenever they were threatened - and sometimes human rights as well.

In the event, because of the limitations of European military capability and materiel, and the fact that it proved much harder to dislodge Gaddafi than some had anticipated, the US had to play a larger role than Obama would have wanted. This led Robert Gates, by now Obama's outgoing Secretary of Defense, to deliver a withering attack on defence cuts and a lack of political will among European nations, warning: 'If current trends in the decline of European defence capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US political leaders ... may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost.' (Gates 2011) Obama and Gates had put down a marker and an important precedent had been set.

Although the Libyan operation was ultimately successful, the Syrian crisis that followed in 2011 and 2012 proved a more difficult test for Obama and threw into sharper relief the limitations of US interventionist power. Following the Libya model, the US initially tried to secure a consensus in the Security Council, condemning the regime of Bashar-el-Assad and eventually calling for his departure (Obama 2011e). However, the US and allies were impotent in the face of Russian and Chinese opposition, and remained frustrated. The fragmented nature of the Syrian opposition, the strength of the Syrian military – which continued to receive support from both Russia and Iran – and the nature of the terrain, all ruled out any unilateral action. While the Security Council remained deadlocked, Syria drifted painfully into a tragic civil war.

Thus a 'humanitarian intervention' proved beyond Obama's reach in this case supporting the claim of US decline and systemic constraint advanced in Chapter 2.

### Conclusion

Writing towards the end of the first term of Obama's Presidency, the respected American journalist and writer David Sanger described 'the slow emergence of an Obama doctrine, a redefinition of the circumstances under which the United States will use diplomacy, coercion, and force to shape the world around it.' Sanger claimed that:

'When confronted with a direct threat to American security, Obama has shown he is willing to act unilaterally - in a targeted, get-in-and-get-out-fashion, that avoids, at all costs, the kind of messy ground wars and lengthy occupations that have drained America's treasury and spirit for the past decades ... a strategy of confrontation and concealment, a precise, directed, economy of force.'

But, Sanger argued, the other side to this doctrine was that unless a threat went 'to the heart of America's own security - if it is a threat to the global order but not to the country', Obama had been far more reluctant to act unless others with more at stake were prepared to bear the greatest risks and contribute the lion's share of resources:

'In an age of reckonings, when so many bills have come due, Obama has made the case for an America that can no longer do it all. It must pick its fights.' (Sanger 2009 xiv-xv)

As this chapter has shown, Obama has budged not an inch from Bush's insistence on America's right to defend itself when its national security interests are threatened, even where this means an exceptionalist interpretation of international law (Ralph 2009). By defining itself as being engaged in a 'transnational global conflict' the US can justify – to itself if not to others – just about any form of pre-emptive strike. Obama has found a new way of taking full advantage of US technological superiority to deliver military effect in a way no other power can – as seen by the increased investment in unmanned aerial systems and in a global Special Forces capability to 'take out the terrorists' wherever they are.

We should not be surprised that this is the case, given the consistent line Obama has maintained from the day he announced his Presidential campaign. What has emerged – and where one suspects the realities of power have led Obama to modify the views he once held - is a new realism about what can be achieved through large-scale military expeditions in faraway places, like Afghanistan, with very different political economies from Western countries. Here the challenge is not so much winning the war, where the US remains all-powerful, but winning the peace. Obama was always clear that using parties in a civil war as proxies for US interests was a dangerous game, as revealed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The lessons from both theatres have been learnt – the hard way – and 'nation-building' is now recognised as something considerably more complicated than was once thought; by and large this trap has been avoided in Libya.

At the same time, although Obama continues to profess the alignment of US values and interests this translates into a relatively cautious approach to 'humanitarian intervention', as the people of Syria have discovered. R2P is largely irrelevant to the Obama doctrine: useful in rallying support where intervention is feasible as in the Libyan case (although interestingly never referred to in so many words by the Administration) but not seen as establishing an obligation to intervene in the face of the kind of political obstacles that prevailed over Syria. In this sense Obama has perhaps unsurprisingly not been able to advance from the position in which Bush found himself over Darfur in 2005.

Only time will tell whether, in the round, the Obama doctrine is seen to be a 'smart' use of power or one short on moral courage as well as international legitimacy. Can terrorism be contained by a combination of targeted killings and economic assistance programmes, or does the 'collateral damage' of the former negate the effects of the latter? (Chapter 9.) Will a more modest ambition for what can be achieved by 'boots on the ground' survive the test of a deepening confrontation with Iran over its nuclear programme? (Chapter 8.) Given declining resources, will the US be able to succeed by doing less of the same, or is a more fundamental rethink necessary? (Chapter 2.) Following his re-election in November 2012 will President Obama be free to develop his approach to foreign policy in new ways or will his second term much resemble the first?



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