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The Obama Doctrine and Military Intervention

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay of discourse and practice in American grand strategy under President Obama. A particular focus is the trajectory of military intervention, from the 'surge' in Afghanistan to the campaign against DAESH, and how competing discourses of hegemony, engagement and restraint have informed U.S. national security policy and the application of military power. The paper analyses how President Obama followed a post-American vision of hegemony intended to lower the financial and human cost of American primacy through burden sharing and 'leading from behind.' This strategy resulted in a recalibration of American military power that shifted its emphasis to covert operations, and the use of drones and Special Forces in combating terrorism, while ultimately prioritizing the Asia-Pacific over the Middle East as region of vital strategic interest to the U.S. Oscillating between limited engagement and extraction from the latter region however, undermined America's leadership position both at home and abroad.

Keywords

Grand strategy, national security, discourse, military intervention, Barack Obama.

Introduction[†]

On a trip to Asia in April 2014, President Obama employed a uniquely American baseball analogy to contrast the popular reflection of his foreign policy in Washington with his own definition of the 'Obama Doctrine:'

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You hit singles, you hit doubles; every once in a while we may be able to hit a home run. That may not always be sexy. That may not always attract a lot of attention, and it doesn't make for good argument on Sunday morning shows. But we steadily advance the interests of the American people and our partnership with folks around the world.¹

This careful appreciation for the scope and limitations of American power and influence in the world by the President of the U.S. renewed once more a virulent debate about Obama's grand strategy in the American media and among the U.S. foreign policy establishment.² In fact, shortly after his Asia trip, when an even more off-hand description of his basic foreign policy premise had become prominent, Obama announced a final drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan until 2016. This was supposed to end America's longest-running war by the time the President would leave office in 2017, yet it also provided his critics with further evidence that a policy of geopolitical retrenchment lay at the heart of Obama's grand strategy.³

Partly to counter this prevalent criticism of his administration's retreat from American leadership, Obama presented a much anticipated declaration of the 'Obama Doctrine' on May 28, 2014 to the graduation class of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the same location where he had announced a substantial troop increase to Afghanistan five years earlier. As announced by the White House, the President would now, after having wound up the legacy of the Bush wars, finally offer his own strategic vision of national security.⁴

Far from a new or original interpretation of America's role in the world however, Obama used his West Point speech to reiterate a series of familiar themes that had been prevalent in his formulation of grand strategy ever since he took office in January 2009: the continued indispensability of American world leadership; a strong emphasis on cooperative engagement, increased burden sharing with allies and partners in support of a liberal international order; the end of America's decade of war; a more limited national security focus on counter-terrorism; and finally a prioritization of America's domestic renewal, greater concern with military restraint and the prudent use of American power abroad.⁵ As Obama explained at West Point:

America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will. The military... is, and always will be, the backbone of

that leadership. But U.S. military action cannot be the only, or even primary, component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.⁶

Far from a coherent strategic vision, the West Point speech revealed once more the inherent tension between the established hegemonic imagination of American exceptionalism and its foundation in military pre-eminence, and the countering discourses of ‘nation-building at home,’ and ‘leading from behind.’ Unable and unwilling to artificially dissolve this tension, Obama thus formulated a grand strategy that failed to deliver the coherent rationale and consistent narrative that most experts and commentators demanded of the ‘big picture’ of America’s role in the world.⁷ Obama’s presentation at West Point and the controversial reaction to it in the American media and expert circles, from *CNN* and the *New York Times* to *Foreign Affairs* and the *National Interest*, once again confirmed the intertextual connectivity, but also the hybridity and ideational complexity of the President’s geopolitical vision, which Obama himself had placed between the contradictory impulses of ‘isolationism’ and ‘interventionism.’⁸

Grand Strategy as Contested Discourse: Hegemony, Engagement and Restraint

Grand strategy operates as set of interconnected geopolitical discourses which establish constructs of national identity and link this ideational paradigm to a corresponding political practice in foreign and security policy. The meaning of a grand strategy, such as the ‘Obama Doctrine,’ extends beyond a rational calculation and equation of means and ends to produce national security against external threats; it functions as an internal identity performing discourse constituting a national sense of Self.⁹ Methodologically, the level of acceptance and political relevance of this social construction can be gauged through its reproduction as authoritative and legitimate by a multitude of influential discursive producers, ranging from government officials to academic experts and elite media outlets. It is this intertextuality that establishes grand strategy as a dominant ‘regime of truth’ in the sense of Foucault.¹⁰

The reconceptualization of grand strategy as discourse is derived from critical approaches that seek to widen and deepen understandings of international

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conceptualizations of the identity-security link. These basic discourses of American grand strategy can be identified as hegemony, engagement, and restraint respectively. They differed in their use of key representations of geopolitical identity and their interlinkage to different national security policies.

Hegemony represented the dominant strand of American grand strategy discourse under Obama. This widely shared and entrenched geopolitical vision – the default position of the U.S. foreign policy establishment – promoted the idea of the unique global leadership role of the U.S. as morally preferable and functionally essential. Frequently, such terms as ‘hegemony,’ ‘primacy,’ ‘indispensable nation,’ ‘American exceptionalism’ or ‘global leadership’ were used interchangeably to describe both the dominant position of the U.S. in world politics, and America’s special responsibility to continuously maintain the liberal international order that was established under U.S. stewardship following World War II.¹²

Ideationally, the hegemony discourse was anchored in the belief in American exceptionalism. This widespread and deep-seated, mythologized identity construct constituted America as a uniquely powerful entity and ‘chosen nation’ with a special role to play in history to guarantee the success of freedom and democracy in the world.¹³ Practically, hegemony was guaranteed through America’s economic status and, in particular, its unique capability for global power projection and military command of the global commons.¹⁴ The *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) of 2010, for example, stated that the U.S. remained the “only nation able to project and sustain large-scale operations over extended distances,” resulting in an unique responsibility for global leadership.¹⁵ A grand strategy of liberal hegemony thus entailed both the material preponderance and primacy of American power that was

to be perpetuated, and an activist political leadership role in world politics, committed to the global spread of Western democratic values and capitalist principles reflecting America's own liberalism and 'exceptional' identity.¹⁶

Underlying the engagement discourse in turn was the assessment that the U.S. was experiencing a period of relative decline, with its hegemonic 'unipolar moment' after the end of the Cold War giving way to a 'post-American world.'¹⁷ While the U.S. was expected to remain the most powerful actor in the international system for the foreseeable future, it was characterized as *primus inter pares* rather than a quasi-imperial colossus or unchecked global 'hyper-power.' Instead, the U.S. had to engage with rising powers to maintain a liberal order that could no longer rely on the sole leadership of just one dominant actor.¹⁸ Rather than the use of America's unmatched military power, this discourse emphasized diplomacy, economic interdependence, 'soft power,' and the importance of international organizations and multilateral institutions. High-profile U.S. government institutions like the National Intelligence Council (NIC), leading public intellectuals such as Fareed Zakaria and Zbigniew Brzezinski, and influential elite media outlets all promoted variants of engagement under Obama.¹⁹ Turning away from the singularity of American exceptionalism, a globally networked structure of interconnected levels of governance and economic openness dominated the geopolitical imagination in this discourse.

Restraint formed the third basic discourse of American grand strategy under the Obama presidency. This geopolitical vision stood diametrically opposed to grand strategies of neoconservative primacy, global leadership and liberal interventionism and thus the dominant Washington consensus on liberal hegemony. Closely associated with the realist school of IR, and such prominent neorealist scholars as John Mearsheimer or Stephen Walt, restraint was frequently articulated as grand strategy of 'offshore balancing' by associated scholars and think tanks.²⁰ While maintaining its position of regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere, the U.S. was advised to mobilize its military resources only when vital national security interests were concerned. Considering the underlying geopolitical imagination of the restraint discourse, instead of acting as the 'policeman of the world,' the U.S. was supposed to emphasize a domestic focus of 'nation building at home.' The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were characterized as a waste of financial and military resources and dangerous folly, fuelled by geopolitical visions of American omnipotence and exceptionalist hubris.

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President Obama's strategic vision and conduct of national security policy responded to what he defined as the heightened complexity of world politics at the beginning of the 21st century. Here, various economic, social, and political dynamics did not allow for coherent but overly simplistic narratives, supposed

to capture a nation's imagination and give purpose to its power. While not quite post-American, the 'Obama Doctrine' was characterized by a multiplicity of the aforementioned discourses and a fluidity of meaning. This discursive multidimensionality, however, was rejected outright by Obama's many critics on both the left and right. The

'Obama Doctrine' disappointed demands for a strategic course correction by critics of the Washington consensus, yet at the same time, Obama did not fully subscribe to maintaining the status quo and promoting the elite accord of liberal hegemony, resulting in the contradictory character of the Obama Doctrine that oscillated between hegemony, engagement, and restraint. This multiplicity was most strikingly on display in Obama's use of force.

Nation-building at Home, Covert Operations Abroad

President Obama reformulated the use of American military power for the pursuit of U.S. national security in significant ways, and by doing so partially redefined the meaning of America's global primacy. When Obama entered the White House, he inherited two ongoing wars; the one in Iraq, he had always opposed and characterized as the 'dumb war.'²¹ On February 27, 2009, Obama fulfilled one of his central campaign promises when he announced that all U.S. forces would leave Iraq by the end of 2011. Afghanistan, however, Obama had referred to as a 'war of necessity' that had been under-resourced by the Bush administration because of the distraction of Iraq.²² Obama intended to change this.

Shortly after his inauguration in January 2009, Obama authorized a troop increase in Afghanistan of 17,000 soldiers in response to an urgent request by the local commander of U.S. forces, General McKiernan, while an initial sixty-day review of the war launched by the White House was still underway.²³ As the *New York Times* observed, the war in Afghanistan would from now

on carry ‘Obama’s stamp.’²⁴ Following the sixty-day review, President Obama agreed to dispatch another 4,000 soldiers to Afghanistan to implement a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, and to ‘disrupt, dismantle and defeat’ al-Qaeda.²⁵ Input for the review also came from the influential Center of a New American Security that had been a staunch supporter of counter-insurgency operations from the outset.²⁶ The implementation of a strategy of counter-insurgency for Afghanistan by the Obama White House was also the result of an institutionalized exchange in the production of strategic knowledge via Washington’s ‘rotating door,’ linking the policy advice of think tanks and the policymaking of defence officials and security experts.

As a result of a more comprehensive three-month Afghanistan review, Obama then agreed to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan in November 2009, bringing the total American troop strength there to just under 100,000. However, with the decision to ‘surge’ in Afghanistan, announced at West Point on December 1, 2009, Obama, at the same time, changed gear and set new priorities for the war, including a fixed date for the withdrawal of the American military presence there. As Obama declared:

We have been at war now for eight years, at enormous cost in lives and resources. ... And having just experienced the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the American people are understandably focused on rebuilding our economy and putting people to work here at home.²⁷

Instead of victory through an open-ended counter-insurgency operation, Obama focused on an exit strategy that would allow the U.S. to start withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan from July 2011 onwards. After the end of 2014, U.S. troops would no longer serve in an active combat role, apart from a residual presence meant for counter-terrorism operations to keep a check on the remnants of the al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As with the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq however, Obama would later have to partially reverse his decision, declaring in July 2016 that up to 8,400 American troops (instead of

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5,500 as originally planned) would remain in Afghanistan for the remainder of his presidency to train Afghan forces and support operations against al-Qaeda and other armed groups, including the DAESH. Overall, however, Obama switched to a strategy of ‘good enough’ in Afghanistan.²⁸

This shift in priorities from a full-scale application of primacy to greater military restraint was supposed to finally allow the U.S. to focus on ‘nation building at home.’²⁹ As Obama declared during his 2012 State of the Union Address: “Take the money we’re no longer spending at war, use half of it to pay down our debt, and use the rest to do some nation-building right here at home.”³⁰ Over the course of his presidency, and in particular his second term in office, Obama continued to emphasize his focus on ending America’s wars, not starting new ones, and to weigh his commitment to American national security against his domestic priorities of reforming healthcare, revitalizing the economy and putting the federal budget on a sustainable path. During the 2014 State of the Union address, Obama emphatically declared: “We must fight the battles that need to be fought, not those that terrorists prefer from us – large-scale deployments that drain our strength and may ultimately feed extremism.”³¹

Obama’s emphasis on military restraint, and the need to rebuild American strength at home, were directly linked to key arguments offered by prominent critics of the Washington consensus on liberal hegemony. As the realist Stephen Walt, for example, explained the grand strategy of offshore balancing: “That strategy – which would eschew nation-building and large onshore ground and air deployments – would both increase our freedom of action and dampen anti-Americanism in a number of key areas.”³²

The Cato Institute, an influential libertarian think tank based in Washington D.C. supporting restraint, echoed this sentiment: “We [the Americans] should reduce our military power in order to be more secure.”³³ When in September 2014 Obama announced a new U.S.-led offensive against the DAESH terror organization, which had conquered large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, he therefore made it clear that above all else, he wanted to avoid getting sucked back into the quagmire of Iraq.³⁴ While Obama declared a prolonged campaign to destroy the DAESH, including the formation of an international coalition to that effect, and announced U.S. air strikes in Syria, over the coming months he vehemently and repeatedly ruled out American

‘boots on the ground.’³⁵ Obama thus refrained from an active combat role for U.S. ground troops, yet thousands of U.S. soldiers would nonetheless return to the country. In presenting his strategy against the DAESH, Obama again reiterated the theme of burden-sharing that would allow the U.S. to once again ‘lead from behind:’

...this is not our fight alone. American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.³⁶

Obama was by no means an isolationist or pacifist. He repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to use military force unilaterally and decisively when he deemed it necessary for the vital interest of the U.S. – most notably with the violation of Pakistani sovereignty in the daring raid on Osama bin Laden in 2011. As Obama had declared in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in December 2009: “Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.”³⁷

Obama’s strategic vision incorporated significant elements of realpolitik thinking and a realist concern for conserving America’s financial, economic and military resources, while voicing fundamental doubts over the efficacy of military interventions. This strong emphasis on restraint in Obama’s strategic thinking was also reflected in his frequently-stated admiration for Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian, who had warned against Americans’ penchant for assuming a stance of moral superiority and their own innocence in conducting foreign affairs, instead of advocating a course of moderation and humility.³⁸

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Besides attempting to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama also followed a course of greater military restraint when he initiated a profound rhetorical and operational shift away from the strategic focus of George W. Bush’s ‘War on Terror.’ During a speech at the National Defense University

(NDU) in May 2013, one of the nation's prime locations for the senior military education of grand strategy, Obama declared a change in American counter-terrorism strategy that was widely perceived as an unofficial announcement of an end of the conflict.³⁹ As Obama explained in his speech, 'every war must come to an end:'

Neither I, nor any President can promise the total defeat of terror. ... Targeted actions against terrorists, effective partnerships, diplomatic engagement and assistance – through such a comprehensive strategy we can significantly reduce the chances of large-scale attacks on the homeland and mitigate threats to Americans overseas.⁴⁰

The President redefined Bush's global war into a strategy to manage an existing but not existential threat to the U.S.⁴¹ The speech, at the same time, implied that the U.S. would continue to rely on one particular instrument in America's counter-terrorism arsenal: drones. Under Obama, there was a marked increase in drone strikes against suspected terrorist targets in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries, such as Yemen and Somalia.⁴² These attacks with guided bombs and missiles against suspected terrorist targets, launched from remote-controlled, unmanned aerial vehicles, were credited by U.S. officials for having seriously 'disrupted and degraded' al-Qaeda and affiliated groups and their operational capacity. In the words of Obama: "Dozens of highly skilled al Qaeda commanders, trainers, bomb makers and operatives have been taken off the battlefield."⁴³

At NDU, Obama presented several criteria under which the U.S. was supposed to operate in relation to drone strikes and counter-terrorism policy. These included an existing agreement of cooperation between the U.S. and the country in whose territory the drones operated, the use of drones only where the insertion of special operations troops was not feasible, and the use of drones without host nation consent only if a government was either incapable of operating, or unwilling to operate against suspected terrorists. Drones were a stopgap measure, a tactical, technological solution to the symptoms of terrorism and violent extremism, not a long-term strategy to combat its root causes. Yet, the fact remained that the use of drones and other covert operations represented a powerful, if largely invisible expression of American primacy.

Violating the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other nations is fundamentally at odds with notions of cooperative engagement and mutual respect. The outrage the bin Laden raid produced in Pakistan over the covert infiltration of Pakistani territory in May 2011 triggered a political fallout that has never been fully resolved.⁴⁴ Furthermore, as McCrisken and Phythian have pointed out, Obama's use of drones raised fundamental questions over the "morality, legitimacy, accountability, and proportionality" of targeted killings and U.S. counter-terrorism policy in general.⁴⁵ According to Dennis Blair, former U.S. Director of National Intelligence, Obama's signature counter-terrorism policy was politically advantageous: "low cost, no U.S. casualties, gives the appearance of toughness. It plays well domestically, and it is unpopular only in other countries."⁴⁶

In combination with the emphasis on Special Forces, as highlighted by the assassination of Osama bin Laden by U.S. Navy SEALs, the suspected use of cyber technologies against Iran's nuclear program, such as the 'stuxnet' computer virus, and the comprehensive surveillance activities by the National Security Agency (NSA), revealed by the agency's former contractor Edward Snowden, President Obama reformulated the exercise of U.S. hegemony in surprising ways.⁴⁷ This also found a particular echo in American popular culture, from the Pentagon-supported and Navy-produced *Act of Valor*, to the immensely successful *Call of Duty* videogame franchise, which regularly featured the use of drones and U.S. special operations soldiers in global counter-terrorism campaigns. A prominent example was also Katherine Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013) on the CIA's ten-year hunt for Osama bin Laden, which had official assistance from the White House to popularize what may be Obama's most significant national security achievement.

Yet Obama's aggressive counter-terrorism policy also counter-acted his pledge to seek a 'new beginning' with Muslim countries. According to opinion polls, in the Middle East hostility towards the U.S. was higher in 2013 than when Obama became President.⁴⁸ Aside from assurances by U.S. officials, inducing the President, that U.S. actions were 'effective' and 'legal,' and that drone targets would be carefully selected and 'collateral damage' kept to a minimum, no fundamental change of policy was likely to occur under President Obama. Remarkably, Obama was directly involved in approving the individual targets of drone strikes,⁴⁹ a personal participation of an American president in the details of military operations not seen since President Lyndon B. Johnson personally approved targets for U.S. air strikes over North Vietnam.

President Obama's vision of engagement attempted to balance a tacit appreciation for an emerging 'post-American world' with a continued emphasis on American hegemony and global leadership. A similar tension existed between the President's repeated insistencies that the 'tide of war' was receding and Obama's increased use of covert operations, drone strikes and secret intelligence assets abroad. While the era of large-scale American counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan was ending, the U.S. continued to wage a war from the shadows against suspected terrorists and their networks. These covert tools of American primacy demonstrated a continued reliance on unilateralism, and the global projection of military power in the pursuit of U.S. national security, but with almost no risk of American casualties, and

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far fewer financial resources required. Practically, the use of these covert instruments of American power did fall in line with Obama's verdict that U.S. national security should be pursued more cost-

effectively, with less direct military involvement on the ground, and less burden on the American taxpayer. Obama therefore reoriented and recalibrated the use of force by the U.S., while simultaneously perpetuating the condition of permanent warfare under which the U.S. has operated in the post-9/11 environment.

Leading from Behind

The end of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan notwithstanding, global leadership and military pre-eminence remained the basic tenets of the dominant American grand strategy discourse in Washington: a lens of geopolitical indispensability, national exceptionalism and military singularity through which America's global role was constructed in the eyes of elites and the public. A 2011 Pew research poll, for example, found that nine out of ten Americans, across party lines, stated that the U.S. either stood above all other countries in the world (38%) or was one of the greatest along with some others (53%).⁵⁰ At the same time, however, the geopolitical ambition and scope of the American leadership role were being scaled back under Obama, adding a further dimension of tension and inconsistency to American grand strategy. This tension was most obvious in Obama's 'leading from behind'

approach in the Libya crisis, and his response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

In publicly advocating U.S. involvement in Libya, the President once again invoked the image of American indispensability:

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.⁵¹

The U.S. however, soon withdrew from the frontlines and let NATO, especially France and the United Kingdom, take the lead in operating militarily against Gaddafi and his forces.⁵² This new, more cooperative, and at the same time more limited and restrained approach would become famous as 'leading from behind.' The term was attributed to an unknown member of Obama's national security staff, and found a wide media echo, in particular after it featured prominently in an article published in the *New Yorker*.⁵³

The political and public reaction to 'leading from behind' was so vehement because the term seemed to encapsulate a new geopolitical vision, a new way the U.S. exercised its power and understood its hegemonic position in world politics. As Ryan Lizza, the author of the *New Yorker* article, put it: "at the heart of the idea of leading from behind is the empowerment of other actors to do your bidding..."⁵⁴ At the same time, as the advisor who coined the phrase admitted, this approach counteracted the dominant, popular imagination of America's world role and basic understanding of who the country was and how it acted: "It's so at odds with the John Wayne expectation for what America is in the world."⁵⁵ Under Obama, the global sheriff was looking for deputies. To Republicans 'leading from behind' represented further proof that Obama's vision consisted of diminishing American power in the world, and accepting American decline.⁵⁶ Although Obama never used the term 'leading from behind' himself, it seemed to fit with the geopolitical vision of America's changed role in a more interdependent world that he had laid out in successive statements and speeches. At the same time, the popular reaction to 'leading

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from behind' revealed the American public's great ambivalence over changes in the identity discourse.

There was a growing popular sentiment in the U.S. that questioned the country's extensive foreign commitments, and that demanded greater focus on domestic concerns. A much reported Pew research poll in 2013, for example, found that 52% of Americans were of the opinion that the U.S. should 'mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own' – the first time since 1964 that more than half the public held that view.⁵⁷ This result, and similar polls like it, were promptly denounced as signs of a dangerously increasing mood of 'isolationism' among the American people by proponents of the hegemony discourse in an attempt to discredit views suggesting greater American restraint on the world stage.⁵⁸ This included key elite media outlets like the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, or the *Wall Street Journal*. As such, the public's endorsement of 'leading from behind' and policies of greater restraint also revealed a widening rift between the foreign policy establishment, including the mainstream American media, and the popular sentiment of many ordinary Americans. This rift would culminate in the candidacy and eventual election of Donald Trump to the presidency.

In trying to differentiate a policy of non-interventionism and military restraint from the stigma of isolationism employed by neoconservative primacists and liberal hegemonists, Obama was again reproducing key arguments forwarded by proponents of the restraint discourse. As Cato, for example, commented: "the public is neither isolationist nor misguided when it comes to foreign policy. Americans do not want to withdraw from the world; they just prefer not to try to run it with their military."⁵⁹ On May 28, 2014, Obama made his case for greater restraint at West Point:

Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences, without building international support and legitimacy for our action, without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required.⁶⁰

Obama's careful shift in perspective about the possibilities of America's role in the world, and the more limited meaning of military force, however, seemed

also to correspond with a certain generational change in popular attitudes toward American exceptionalism. A 2011 Pew poll found that only 32% of the Millennial generation in the U.S. thought their country was ‘the greatest in the world’ – compared to 72% of those between the ages of 76-83.⁶¹

Even more striking when considering the established mainstream consensus of U.S. foreign policy were poll results about the popular sentiments of Americans toward American leadership in the world, the sacrosanct mantra of the grand strategy discourse in Washington that Obama too was unwilling to breach. As Pew reported in August 2014, about 70 per cent of Americans favoured a ‘shared leadership role in the world.’⁶² Despite the majority of popular, formal and practical discourses that overwhelmingly stressed the exceptionalism and indispensability of American leadership in the world, and the paramount importance of U.S. military pre-eminence for peace, prosperity, and freedom, a clear majority of Americans seemed willing to accept a more restrained and less hegemonic role of their country in world politics. As an article in *Time* magazine concluded: “Simply put, Obama has given the people the foreign policy they want – one in which America ‘mind[s] its own business.’”⁶³ Obama himself acknowledged this national mood of retrenchment and restraint, when he directly quoted from a veteran’s letter addressed to him, during his nationally televised address on Syria on September 10, 2013: “This nation is sick and tired of war.”⁶⁴

But while in his Syria speech Obama reemphasized his focus to end America’s wars, not to start new ones, and to take aim at rebuilding the nation at home, he did invoke the image of American exceptionalism as a special responsibility for the U.S. to act abroad when its unique values were violated, as with the gas attacks attributed to the Assad regime in Syria. Yet Obama also went to great lengths to distinguish a possible military intervention in Syria from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, from the beginning ruling out the possibilities of ground invasion, regime change, or even a prolonged air campaign along the lines of the Kosovo or Libya examples. This limited and cautious link between American exceptionalism and the use of force that Obama demonstrated in his speech was ultimately completely severed, when Obama postponed seeking an authorization for military strikes from Congress; a vote he was likely to have lost. Instead, Obama opted for a diplomatic solution in accordance with Russia to get rid of Assad’s chemical weapons. Obama closed his remarks on Syria with the following statement:

America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death...I believe we should act. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional.⁶⁵

The image of American exceptionalism in Obama's speech implied a special responsibility of the U.S. to commit its uniquely powerful military assets when its liberal values were violated; however, a policy that would demonstrate this failed to materialize. While President Obama had worked towards redefining American grand strategy toward restraint, engagement and multilateral cooperation, the country's geopolitical identity remained firmly linked to an image of American leadership and military pre-eminence: the use of force in defence of American liberal values and national interests. On Libya, Obama could reconcile this tension, encapsulated in the phrase 'leading from behind.'⁶⁶

On Syria however, the implied consequences for crossing the 'red lines' Obama set up in his speech did not result in military action by the U.S., and 'red lines' subsequently became a symbol for the perceived weakness of the U.S. under Obama among conservative critics, foreign policy experts and the media alike.⁶⁷ And even though a majority of Americans had favoured a diplomatic solution in Syria, the dominant impression was that Obama and the U.S. had been diplomatically outmanoeuvred by Russia.⁶⁸ A CBS/*New York Times* poll, for example, released on September 25, 2013, found that just 37 per cent of Americans approved of President Obama's handling of the Syria crisis.

The controversy over Syria indicated a fundamental tension prevailing in American grand strategy discourse on all levels, between an emphasis on engagement and restraint and policies reflecting this strategic vision, and a hegemonic imagination that continued to represent the country's geopolitical identity as the world's indispensable and exceptional leader. Obama's political rhetoric of American hegemony in turn produced expectations among elites and the public that the President's political actions would reflect this ideational paradigm.

Yet, the somewhat schizophrenic split in Obama's grand strategy, between continued American primacy and greater restraint in a post-American world

was also present within the American populace, which according to polls favoured diplomatic engagement, and was weary of further military entanglements abroad, but was also

critical of the perceived lack of American leadership and lacking resolve on the world stage. 'Leading from behind' seemed to quite accurately describe the mood of a majority of Americans when it came to their country's preferred role in the world, but the implication of a diminished status of the U.S. was resented at the same time.

The controversy over Syria indicated a fundamental tension prevailing in American grand strategy discourse on all levels.

The established nexus of elite opinion and conventional wisdom on American exceptionalism and liberal hegemony was ultimately most directly challenged by the political rise of Donald Trump and his eventual election to the presidency in November 2016. Trump, a real estate mogul and TV celebrity, had placed himself outside the political mainstream by advocating a nativist, protectionist, and nationalist-isolationist vision for the U.S. under the populist slogan 'America First.' On the campaign trail, Trump had repeatedly called for hard-line anti-immigration measures, an anti-interventionist foreign policy, and a protectionist, economic nationalism attacking mainstream media and the political establishment on both the left and right for failing ordinary Americans.⁶⁹ The key message in Trump's populist 'America First' discourse was that the U.S. would in future prioritize its own national interest above all else, since it had been taken advantage of by the rest of the world for decades.⁷⁰

Trump's ideas were almost universally rejected by the U.S. foreign policy establishment, which saw in him a dangerous outsider who threatened America's global leadership role from within. To these critics, Trump's neo-isolationist nationalism risked the unravelling of a liberal world order to a much larger degree than Obama's 'leading from behind' had done. Key foreign policy ideas voiced by candidate Trump, however, actually seemed to reflect realist ideas for offshore balancing. Trump, for example, had called the NATO alliance 'obsolete,' and suggested that the U.S. could withdraw its troops from South Korea and Japan, resulting in these countries providing for their own defence independently.⁷¹ Both Obama and Trump, then, challenged the Washington foreign policy establishment and the prevailing American grand strategy discourse by suggesting greater salience for realist ideas.

Given Trump's impulsive behaviour, lack of coherent political ideology or worldview, and notorious inconsistency between public announcements and policy outcomes, any talk of an actual Trump Doctrine or grand strategy is highly risky. Despite repeated indications that he favoured a non-interventionist foreign policy, for example, Trump did launch cruise missile attacks on Syria in 2017 and 2018 in retaliation for chemical gas attacks on civilians attributed to the Assad regime. Together with a modest increase in the U.S. defence budget and greater leeway for the Pentagon to conduct counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere, however, it can be said that Trump's approach to national security in his first year in office combined belligerent rhetoric and aggressive military posturing with a considerable degree of continuity in practice.⁷² In this, Trump was again not dissimilar to Obama, who changed the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror,' but kept most of its key practices intact.

Conclusion

Obama's vision of American grand strategy combined elements of hegemony, engagement and restraint, incorporating a set of competing and mutually exclusive discourses. Obama's simultaneous confirmation and contestation of such diverse discursive strands as multilateral hegemony, liberal internationalism, realist offshore balancing, military primacy, and American exceptionalism, made it impossible to assign the President's geopolitical vision a clear and distinctive label that would correspond to the narrative cohesiveness and clarity of purpose geopolitical strategists, foreign policy experts and media pundits expected of an American grand strategy.

While Obama did not holistically reorient the U.S. toward a grand strategy of offshore balancing, he did incorporate key elements of the restraint discourse in his strategic vision, in particular in his use of military power. In fact, over the course of his presidency restraint took on ever-greater significance, both rhetorically and practically, as expressed, for example in the withdrawal from Iraq and drawdown in Afghanistan, even if both decisions were later partially reversed to counter growing security threats. Obama used the image of American exceptionalism to advance policies actually designed to lessen the burden of American leadership, and to divert resources, both economic and intellectual, for domestic priorities, thus inverting the conventional linkage of exceptionalist rhetoric and hegemonic practices expressed through military

interventionism and the use of force. Yet, as the Syria episode illustrated, the identity of America as a leader in world politics and policies that counteracted this identity could not be bridged indefinitely within the existing paradigm.

The conflict between the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and the political practice of cooperative engagement and military restraint under Obama revealed the limits of reframing American grand strategy without also changing its underlying identity discourse. Americans' ongoing identity conflict over their country's role in the world manifested in the domestic controversy over the Obama Doctrine and ultimately paved the way for the rise of 'America First' under Obama's successor Donald Trump.

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