The Middle East, Obama, and America's Quest for a New Grand Strategy

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"I've seen that road before," reads a famous Beatles' song, "It always leads me here" (Lennon-McCartney, 1970). We may be tempted to use such a melancholic song to explain America's policies in the Middle East. In spite of more or less genuine desires not to get stuck into the shifting desert sands of the region, no US president since the end of the Second World War has managed to avoid deep political and military commitments in the Middle East. After the end of the Cold War, the area became a magnet for American troops. The region is so significant on a global level that it turns out to be an inescapable source of concern for a leading world power such as the United States. Powerful transnational factors such as culture and religion, moreover, have prompted a blurred and ever expanding conceptualization of the region. As these lines are written, in spite of president Barack Obama's compelling call for a reduction in US military commitments overseas and greater focus on "nation building here at home"(Obama, 2011), American forces continue to play a crucial role in a great many Middle Eastern trouble spots. A careful analysis of US policy toward the area is of critical importance for the proper understanding of the overall achievements and legacy of the Obama administration's foreign policy. The next paragraphs will thus examine the basic ideas underpinning the Obama administration's strategic outlook and how they have stood the test of Middle Eastern geopolitics – with particular focus on those cases in which the use of American military power has represented a major ingredient in the policy mix.

The persisting importance of the Middle East

As a matter of fact, history and geopolitics suggest that America's predicament in the region is neither surprising nor exceptional. For centuries location, history, and religious factors have made this region a key issue in the calculations of Western powers (Pagden, 2008; Wawro, 2010: 1-13; Frémeaux, 2014: 11-38). From the early XX century onward the rising importance of fossil fuels has added a new major reason for continued interest in the area. Both as the world's largest economy and as the West's leading security provider the United States has thus seen its commitment to the stability of the Middle East and the preservation of access to its oil supplies increase.

In addition to crude geopolitical and economic considerations, US policy in the Middle East has been strongly influenced by ideological factors concerning America's status and role in international relations. During the Cold War, the region gradually became a major theater of the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union. From Henry Truman to Ronald Reagan, the security of the Middle East was a persistent concern of Cold War American presidents – and the theater of both covert operations and full-scale military interventions (Little, 2008: 117-155). In the process, the very concept of Middle East gradually expanded to include large parts of the predominantly Muslim-populated areas of Africa and central and south-western Asia (Bacevich, 2016). It was indeed in the Middle East that the first major crisis of the post-Cold War era – the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 – prompted American leaders to try to articulate a renewed vision for a US-led international order (Ruggie, 1994). From that moment on, the region has become the main testing ground for competing visions of America's role and purpose in the post-Cold War world. From Bush 41's "New World Order" to Bush 43's "Global War On Terror," the central role of America's massive military power and the belief that the US possessed an almost unlimited capability to reshape the international environment became the key assumptions underlying the foreign policy approaches of Obama's post-Cold War predecessors (Haley, 2006; Bacevich, 2013).

As Obama took office in January 2009, such an approach appeared no longer sustainable. As Obama entered the White House, the most pressing issue on the agenda was the need to cope with the military overstretch and economic imbalances inherited by the past administration. The US was under pressure from both exhausting overseas military engagements and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Inevitably, the administration's main efforts concentrated on avoiding economic collapse and promoting reform at home (Mann, 2012: XIX; Chollet, 2016: 51-53). For both ideological and pragmatic reasons, the new president and his staff felt compelled to engage what Derek Chollet (2016) has defined a "Long Game" aimed at reorienting and redefining the direction of America's grand strategy. Within that framework, Obama tried to articulate a foreign policy outlook which called for a conception of US global leadership based on the international rule of law, multilateralism, and diplomacy rather than outright military power. In practical terms, the key foreign policy priority was "rebalancing" – the idea that it was necessary for the US to resist the temptation of military adventurism and, in general, to adopt a more pragmatic attitude on the international stage (Mann, 2012: 340). The Obama administration also announced bold plans to reorganize America's geopolitical priorities and shift the focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific (Clinton, 2011). Yet, in spite of plans for a "pivot" to Asia, the Middle East has remained a major testing ground for US policy-makers and their quest for a viable post-Cold War global strategy.

The Middle East in Obama's world: From rebalancing to engagement

Breaking with his predecessor's missionary rhetoric, Obama outlined a pragmatic and realist policy outlook concerning the US role in the Middle East (Obama, 2009b; Gerges, 2012: 8-9). As for the "War on Terror," the president identified the Iraq War as the "war of choice" that had made it harder to pursue the "war of necessity" – the effort to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. As it emerged from public statements and insider accounts, however, Obama was in fact determined to end both conflicts as soon as possible (Obama, 2009b; Woodward, 2010). Soon after taking office, the new president pushed for a new strategy aimed at better addressing the transnational dimension of the Taliban revival, and authorized a temporary increase in troop numbers in Afghanistan in order to help stabilize the country (Obama, 2009a; Bergen, 2011: 309-334). His success in pursuing that goal has been limited. Despite years of US and allied military, political, and economic efforts, Afghanistan's institutions remain extremely fragile, and a sizable number of American troops is set to stay in the country through the end of Obama's mandate (Kugelman, 2016; Salinas, 2016).

The desire to scale down American presence in the Middle East has been further frustrated by the wave of political instability, regime change and violent conflict that has erupted in the Arab world since the end of 2010. Game-changing events – such as regime change and persistent political instability in a long-standing partner of the US such as Egypt, conflict and the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe in oil-rich Libya, and the collapse of the Syrian state followed by the outbreak of an intractable civil war – have made sure that the region remains a central source of concern for Obama and his advisers as well as a key destination for America's troops and military assets.

As sudden and fast-paced events unfolded in the Arab world, the Obama administration tried as much as possible to remain "on the right side of history" without going off track with the rebalancing agenda (Lynch, 2013: 193-235; Gerges, 2012: 106; Chollet, 2016: 91). The crises in Libya and Syria, however, put additional pressure on Obama's effort to reorient America's grand strategy by confronting the administration with the challenge of humanitarian emergencies.

In Libya, the administration faced the challenge of dealing with a popular uprising that quickly degenerated into a mounting humanitarian crisis compounded by the explicit threat of indiscriminate mass atrocities on the part of Libyan dictator Muhammar Qaddafi. In March 2011, with France and Britain ready to intervene military, a supportive Arab League and UN Security Council authorization, the Obama administration eventually opted for a policy of "leading from behind." The result was a British- and French-led NATO air campaign in which the US played a crucial but discrete back up role (Chollet, 2016: 101-115; Hastings, 2011). Such an approach succeeded in preventing a mass slaughter and eventually tipped the military balance in favor of the Libyan rebels without the need to deploy US forces on the ground (O'Hanlon, 2011). As Libya's persistent political instability demonstrates, however, neither the US nor its Western and Arab partners had a sound plan to stabilize the country in the aftermath of regime change (Kuperman, 2015; Goldberg, 2016; Wintour and Elgot, 2016).

Syria presented the Obama administration – and the rest of the world – with yet another massive humanitarian emergency. In fact, as evidence that the Assad regime used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians emerged in August 2013, the call for military intervention became even more compelling. Close regional partners of the US such as the Gulf monarchies strongly supported the resort to military force and France was ready to participate. Contrary to the Libyan case, however, there was neither international consensus around the idea of intervention – Iran and Russia actively supported the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad – nor an apparently viable local opposition to the Syrian dictator (Holland and Bremer, 2013; Lewis et al., 2013). The strategic imperative not to get bogged into in another Iraq-style, large scale and open-ended military engagement in the Middle East – "don't do stupid things" as famously suggested by Obama himself – eventually persuaded the administration to adopt a cautious but controversial policy of military restraint and constant but frustrating diplomacy (Chollet, 2016: 10; Remnick, 2014; Goldberg, 2016; "Syria War: Cessation of hostilities comes into effect," 2016).

The persistent state of war and humanitarian catastrophe in Syria has had a major and negative impact on the Obama administration's effort to extricate the US military from Iraq. Building upon a modicum of political stability and a status of forces agreement achieved in the last phases of the George W. Bush presidency, the Obama administration successfully managed to complete the withdrawal of US combat troops in December 2011 (Gordon and Trainor, 2012: 523-559, 690-693; Logan, 2011). Post-Saddam Iraq, however, failed to develop stable and truly democratic political institutions. Ethnic and sectarian rivalries and violence, compounded by state failure in neighboring Syria, turned the area into breeding ground for extremism – a process that eventually allowed the brutal extremist group and terrorist network known as Islamic State (IS, AKA ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) to conquer vast swathes of territory in both Iraq and Syria ("Sovereignty without security, 2011; "The slow road back, 2013; Weiss and Hassan, 2015). By late summer 2014, IS advances created a direct threat to the Iraqi state, and the Obama administration eventually opted for a new military campaign (Salman and Coles, 2014). Arguably, Obama's response to the rise of IS has been slow – and the idea to dismiss the organization as a "jayvee team" was rather unfortunate – but in the event it seems to reflect the administration's overall strategic vision: a multilateral framework, no massive deployment of American combat troops overseas, and a preference for reliance on air power and local ground forces (Remnick, 2014; Mason, 2014; Stewart and Ponthus, 2014; Irish and Szep, 2014). In fact, the administration's military strategy against IS appears geared at managing and containing the threat while working with allies and other powers with a stake in the conflict in order to find a longer term political solution (Chollet, 2016: 138; Georgy, 2014; Packer, 2014; Kerry, 2014; De Luce, 2015). In the ultimate analysis, however, this new round of American military involvement in Iraq – and Syria – further underscores how difficult it is for America to readjust its global strategic priorities.

During the second term, the foreign policy approach of the Obama administration has evolved toward a loosely framed doctrine of "engagement" directed at countries that have been persistently at odds with the US but appear ready to negotiate (Friedman, 2015; Slaughter, 2015). The most notable result of Obama's "engagement" policy has been the July 2015 deal which sets limits on, and increases international supervision over, Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the gradual lift of international economic sanctions against the Tehran regime (Borger, 2015). The deal has reversed another destabilizing trend inherited by the Obama administration – a dangerous escalation in the longstanding confrontation between the US and Iran – America's longtime Persian Gulf nemesis. The Iranian government has constantly maintained that its nuclear program is peaceful (Zarif, 2014). However, by the time Obama took office, evidence collected by the US and Western intelligence communities strongly suggested that the Tehran regime had explored weaponization options (Pollack, 2013: 39, 51-52). From the standpoint of leaders in Tehran, in the aftermath of America's military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq the quest for a nuclear deterrent made sense (Nasr, 2006: 185-226). Yet a nuclear armed Iran would increase the risk of instability and arms races in the Middle East (Pollack, 2013: 403-404). After years of sanctions and threats of an American – or Israeli – military strike, the 2015 nuclear deal has established a multilateral monitoring framework aimed at ensuring the peaceful intent of the Iranian nuclear program (Mostafavi, 2012; Pollack, 2013; Lewis, 2015). As these lines are written, the eventual normalization of relations between Iran and the US is far from certain. The deal has given rise to heated debates in the US political arena as well as to disorientation and resentment among long-standing US allies such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies (Drew, 2015; Odenheimer and Ben-David, 2015; McDowall and Al Sayegh, 2015). Considering Iran's unquestioned economic potential and geopolitical clout, however, it seems fair to argue that besides minimizing the odds of a nuclear-armed Iran, the deal reflects a pragmatic conception of American national

security policy that had been lacking in the strategic approach of Obama's post-Cold War predecessors.

The Middle East and Obama's long game

Since the end of the Cold War, the Middle East has been the theater of the boom-and-bust of a peculiar American conception of international order – the idea that the US has a mission to transform the world and that the main tool to perform this mission is America's unchallenged military power. The region has been, and remains, a major testing ground of American power.

Encouraged by budgetary constraints and the recent memory of military quagmires, the Obama administration has been ready to engage in a profound and long-lasting reappraisal of America's role in the world (Mann, 2012; Brands, 2014; Chollet, 2016; Goldberg, 2016). Changes in policy have been small and incremental. On the one hand, Obama's foreign policy outlook does not question the assumption of American exceptionalism, and under his watch US foreign policy has remained quite militarized. The administration has shown a very restrained attitude toward the idea of putting boots on the ground overseas. However, a counter-terrorism strategy highly reliant on the massive resort to air power – including controversial drone strikes – and special forces – including the Navy Seal raid that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011 – suggests that after all Obama and his foreign policy staff have neither repudiated the military instrument nor abandoned the objective of preserving America's military edge (Mann, 2012: 151-155; Schmidle, 2011; Becker and Shane, 2012). On the other hand, major foreign policy initiatives adopted by the Obama administration in the Middle East, such as the drastic reduction in troops numbers in Iraq and Afghanistan and the "leading from behind" approach in Libya – reflect a genuine effort to challenge conventional wisdom and try new approaches. The "engagement" policy adopted during Obama's second term and the Iran nuclear deal suggest that Obama's strategic outlook has been much more pragmatic and less militaristic than that of his predecessors. This approach appears to have allowed the US to manage international crises without the need to resort to new, large-scale, and open-ended overseas military commitments, although not all of the high expectations originally raised by Obama have been turned into actual policies (Gerges, 2012: 90-91; Cohen, 2014; O'Hanlon, 2014; Dueck, 2015).

Conclusions

Location, massive oil reserves, powerful transnational forces such as religion and ethnicity, and the persistence of global threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, have made the Middle East a focal point of instability in the modern world as well as a source of concern for a global power such as the United States. The area somewhat invites intervention from great powers with global ambitions. As recent history shows, this power of attraction can become an irresistible urge to intervene for policy-makers that conceive status and leadership in narrow terms of military power. From this point of view, it is not surprising to observe how the Middle East has become so relevant as a testing ground for competing conceptions of America's role in the world in an age of unchallenged US military primacy. The enormous human and economic costs of US military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the financial crisis of 2008, however, significantly tamed America's appetite for military adventures. Such a critical situation has made the quest for a new American grand strategy even more compelling, and Obama's fresh and unconventional foreign policy outlook has had a significant impact.

As the record of policy in the Middle East – especially the Iran deal – shows, Obama's approach can indeed bring positive, even game changing results at a relatively small cost. Progress toward a less militarized, more inclusive, and more sustainable order in the region may indeed signal the transition to a more pragmatic and less militaristic – and perhaps more effective – conception of America's global leadership. The other side of Obama's pragmatism, however, is a certain difficulty to discern a truly long term vision, something that leaves us a bit uncertain about his legacy and the future of his "Long Game." As election day 2016 comes close, it is open to question whether Obama's successors will continue along the path of a more pragmatic American leadership or the "Long Game" will turn out to be only a momentary policy adjustment. From Libya to Afghanistan, the multiple and interrelated crises that tragically continue to torment the Middle East will provide a great many opportunities to test the direction of US global strategy and the quality of America's global leadership.

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