

Obama's Foreign Policy: Between Pragmatic Realism and Smart Diplomacy?

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"I believe that American leadership has been wanting, but is still wanted. We must use what has been called smart power, the full range of tools at our disposal -- diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural -- picking the right tool or combination of tools for each situation. With smart power, diplomacy will be the vanguard of our foreign policy."

(Hillary Clinton's Confirmation Hearing, January 13, 2009)

Since the arrival of the new US President Barack Obama at the White House, the debate on the US foreign policy strategy and its instruments of power and influence has become particularly relevant. Moreover, some recent events such as the US involvement in the war in Libya in March 2011 and the US special-forces operation in Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011, have put the question of US foreign policy strategy on the top of the national and international agendas.

Defining the "Obama doctrine"

Two recent speeches held by the US President have become a privileged focus of study for the political analysts who keep trying to define an Obama doctrine in terms of foreign policy and national security.

The first one, the *Obama's Address to the Nation on Libya*¹ pronounced on March 28, 2011, that aimed at explaining to the American people the reasons and the nature of US participation in the international coalition that started air strikes in the sky above Libya to protect the civilian population from the Qaddafi's forces, was defined by the American press as a key political discourse providing the "*clearest explanation so far of Obama's foreign policy doctrine*"². From this perspective, the Obama doctrine is seen as a new foreign policy strategy, different from the one practiced by Bush, mostly in regard with the instruments of power used and more precisely the return of soft power.

The second one, *President Obama's Speech on US Policy in Middle East and North Africa* held on May 19, 2011, gave more ground to the critics who were quick enough to declare that Obama just borrowed the Bush doctrine. That is the case of the American columnist at *Washington Post* Charles Krauthammer, known for having introduced in the 1990s the concept of "unipolar world" as one built upon the hegemonic power of the USA. Referring to the *President's Middle East Speech* and in particular to Obama's idea that the Middle East policy of the USA will be "*to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to*

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¹ "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya", The White House, Washington D.C., March 28, 2011.

² See "The Birth of an Obama Doctrine", *The Economist*, March 28, 2011.

*democracy*³”, Krauthammer wrote in an article published on May 20, 2011 in the *Washington Post* that “Obama adopts the Bush doctrine, which made the spread of democracy the key US objective in the Middle East⁴”. Embodied in the phrase “Hail the Bush-Obama doctrine⁵”, Krauthammer’s thesis seems to actually make the debate about defining an Obama foreign policy doctrine obsolete. However, it is interesting that what is seen by one as a simple replica of the Bush doctrine, could be interpreted in a completely different way only by removing the stress from the US Middle East policy objectives (spread of democracy through political and economic reforms) towards the power instruments to be used to achieve these objectives. For the tools that Obama intends to use are not related to hard but rather to soft power, in so far as he insisted on the pursuit of peace in the region and on the use of diplomatic and economic tools to facilitate the democratic transition. Furthermore, in his Speech Obama advanced the idea of elaborating some economic programs, such as the Enterprise Funds to invest in Tunisia and Egypt, or the launch of a comprehensive Trade and Investment partnership Initiative to facilitate the trade within the region that could be regarded as a new Marshall Plan for the Middle East and North Africa. Seen from this angle, Obama’s foreign policy doctrine is far more complex and cannot be simply presented as a break or as a continuation of the Bush doctrine.

The ambition of this paper is therefore to analyze the new focus of the US Administration on foreign policy strategy and instruments of power and influence. Is there really an Obama doctrine in terms of what John Ikenberry calls a “grand strategy⁶”, that is to say a coherent vision of how the USA will respond to today’s global challenges and threats? How will they redefine their national interests and what instruments of power (military, economic, political, diplomatic, etc.) will they predominantly use?

Obama’s foreign policy strategy: riding or breaking the wave of Bush doctrine?

Political analysts tend to analyze Obama’s foreign policy in comparison with the one practiced by the Bush Administration, and more precisely with what is commonly known as the “Bush doctrine”. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the “Bush doctrine” is generally defined as a turn in the US foreign policy marked by a full-scale militarization and unilateralism meant to defend the US national security and vital interests by imposing the US hegemony in the world. As put by the former President of the *National Intelligence Council* (NIC) and former assistant Secretary of Defense, Joseph Nye, Bush made three main changes to US grand strategy: “reducing Washington’s reliance on permanent alliances and international institutions, expanding the traditional right of preemption into a new doctrine of preventive war, and advocating coercive democratization as a solution to Middle East terrorism⁷.”

The landmark of Bush doctrine is thus what the former Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice described as “*transformational diplomacy*” based on the policy of “*freedom agenda*”, that is to say, the defense of liberty as an alternative to tyranny and the promotion of democracy, even by means of force, in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes, some of them considered to be

³ “Obama’s Speech on US Policy in the Middle East and North Africa”, The White House, Washington D.C., May 19, 2011.

⁴ Charles Krauthammer, “The News in Obama’s Speech”, *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2011.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See John Ikenberry, “The Right Grand Strategy”, *The American Interest*, January-February 2010.

⁷ Joseph Nye, “Transformational Leadership and US Grand Strategy”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 2006.

particularly dangerous for US security and therefore qualified as “*rogue states*”⁸. Practiced predominantly in the Middle East and enacted with the Afghanistan war (September 2001), and especially the Iraq war (March 2003), the “freedom agenda” policy was believed to provoke a positive “domino effect” and lead to the democratization of the whole region.

According to Fareed Zakaria, the “*formula to explain Bush’s foreign policy is simple: Unipolarity + 9/11 + Afghanistan = Unilateralism + Iraq*”⁹. But the problem of Bush’s foreign policy is that it was too much focused on the idea of American exceptionalism embodied in the belief that America is, in Madeleine Albright’s words, the “*indispensable nation*”, as well as on the idea of the predominance of the American power, especially hard power, used by the hard-line neoconservatives in the Administration to go to war in Iraq despite the disapproval of traditional US allies such as Germany and France, and the lack of a UN Security Council mandate necessary to legally authorize a military intervention. The well known result of this “imperialistic” and self-centered foreign policy, neglecting the rest of the world, was the deterioration of the image of the USA and the rise of anti-American feelings especially in the Muslim world.

In contrast to Bush’s doctrine codified in the 2002 and 2006 *National Security Strategy* (NSS)¹⁰, Obama’s foreign policy strategy, as expressed in the 2010 NSS¹¹, aims at reaffirming the US leadership in a changing world where the American power has been challenged by new actors, especially the emerging countries forming the group of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are seen as the “new challengers”). In this regard, the first difference with the realist belief of Bush doctrine, placing the stress on the US hegemony in the world “balance of power”, is the recognition of the “relativization” of the American power. This idea has already been advanced in the beginning of the 2000s by some famous foreign policy analysts such as Z. Brzezinski, J. Nye and most recently by Fareed Zakaria in his famous essay “*The Post American World and the Rise of the Rest*”. In a world of complex interdependence the relativization of the American power is the recognition of the fact that, in Nye’s phrase, “*USA can’t go it alone*”. The change in the vision of US role and power in the world is confirmed by Obama’s Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: “*Today, we must acknowledge two inescapable facts that define our world: First, no nation can meet the world’s challenges alone. The issues are too complex. Too many players are competing for influence, from rising powers to corporations to criminal cartels; from NGOs to al-Qaida; from state-controlled media to individuals using Twitter. Second, most nations worry about the same global threats, from non-proliferation to fighting disease to counterterrorism, but also face very real obstacles – for reasons of history, geography, ideology, and inertia. They face these obstacles and they stand in the way of turning commonality of interest into common action*”¹².

⁸ The concept of “*rogue states*” was introduced by the US Administration in the 1980s to design states that did not respect the international law (states out-of-law) or states that were suspected of supporting terrorist groups (“terrorist states”). In 1986 Ronald Reagan denounced Libya as a “rogue state” because of Colonel Qaddafi’s authoritarian and military regime seen as especially dangerous for the US security. After 9/11, the Bush Administration associated the concept of «*rogue states*» to the concept of “*Axis of evil*”. According to G. W. Bush, the «*Axis of evil*» was composed of three rogue states - Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

⁹ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, p. 223.

¹⁰ The *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (NSS) is an official document elaborated by the US President and presented to the Congress every four years. This document lays down the main objectives of the US foreign policy. See *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, Washington D.C., 20 September 2002, as well as the 2006 NSS.

¹¹ See *The National Security Strategy*, The White House, Washington D.C. May 2010.

¹² “Hillary Clinton’s Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Affairs”, July 15, 2009, The White House, Washington D.C.

The second major difference compared to the Bush doctrine is the change in the perception of the role of the USA on the international scene. In a world of growing economic and political interdependence, America is no longer seen as an “indispensable nation”, but rather as an “indispensable leader” as “*for just as no nation can meet these challenges alone, no challenge can be met without America*¹³”. President Obama thus defines the new US leadership in terms of partnership: “*We must lead not in the spirit of a patron but the spirit of a partner*¹⁴”, while in complete tunes with this idea Hillary Clinton speaks about the role of the USA in a “multi-partner world”: “*We will lead by inducing greater cooperation among a greater number of actors and reducing competition, tilting the balance away from a multi-polar world and toward a multi-partner world*¹⁵”. Thus Bush’s foreign policy strategy of “freedom agenda” seems to be replaced by the “agenda setting” strategy where the role of the USA is that of a leader seeking, through dialogue and cooperation with other states, common solutions to global problems. Drawing on the above analysis, it appears that Obama’s foreign policy can be defined in opposition to the one elaborated and implemented by his predecessor in the White House. In support of this argument, it is often said that Bush’s foreign policy was predominantly based on the military and economic power, that is to say on “hard power”, whereas Obama’s team is rather advocating the use of diplomacy and development aid, known as what Joseph Nye has called “soft power”, to achieve US foreign policy goals. However, qualifying Bush as a “hard power president”, and consequently as a confirmed realist, whereas Obama as a “soft power president” with an idealist vision (applied especially to Obama’s idea of a “zero nuclear world” advanced in his Speech in Prague in April 2009¹⁶), would be a very simplistic statement. In fact, the idea of combining “hard” and “soft power” in what has become known as “smart power” was introduced already during the second term of the Bush presidency.

Obama’s “smart power” foreign policy

In an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2004, Suzanne Nossel, a famous US diplomat, currently working as a Chief Operating Officer for the NGO Human Rights Watch, tried to renew the doctrine of liberal internationalism allegedly adopted, according to her, by the Bush Administration after 9/11, but only in its rhetoric of human rights and democracy, whereas in reality practiced through a strategy of aggressive unilateralism¹⁷. Denouncing Bush’s “hard power” focused foreign policy, Nossel called for the necessity for the US Administration to take into account all instruments of power: “*unlike conservatives, who rely on military power as the main tool of statecraft, liberal internationalists see trade, diplomacy, foreign aid and the spread of American values as equally important*¹⁸”.

In his book “*Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*” also published in 2004, Joseph Nye integrated the concept of “smart power” in his famous dichotomy of “hard” and “soft power”: “*smart power is the combination of hard and soft power*¹⁹”. Since 2003-2004, “smart power” has become the keystone of Nye’s conception of state power and influence: “*Power is one’s ability to affect the behavior of others to get what one wants. There are three basic*

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Barack Obama, *Strengthening Our Common Security by Investing in Our Common Humanity*, Barack Obama’s strategy to promote global development and democracy, 2008, BarackObama.com.

¹⁵ “Hillary Clinton’s Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Affairs”, July 15, 2009, *The White House*, Washington D.C.

¹⁶ “Remarks by President Barack Obama”, Prague, the Czech Republic, *The White House*, Washington D. C. April 5, 2009.

¹⁷ Suzanne Nossel, “Smart Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83, n° 2, March/April, 2004.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Joseph Nye, “The US Can Reclaim Smart Power”, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, Harvard University, January 21, 2009.

ways to do this: coercion, payment and attraction. Hard power is the use of coercion and payment. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction. If a state can set the agenda for others or shape their preferences, it can save a lot of carrots and sticks. But rarely can it totally replace either. Thus the need for smart strategies that combine the tools of both hard and soft power²⁰”.

Although these first attempts of theorizing “smart power” did not really have the intended impact on Bush’s Administration, the concept was adopted by some *think tanks* in Washington, which put it at the core of their research and studies aimed at providing a new foreign policy strategic insights and initiatives for the new Administration. That is the case of the *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, “a bipartisan, independent, non-profit organization headquartered in Washington D.C.²¹”, that created in 2006 a “Commission on Smart Power” directed by J. Nye himself and the former assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage. The goal of this Commission was to study the reasons for the decline of US power and to propose solutions to improve the country’s image by elaborating new strategies to allow America wield its power in a changing world. The Commission’s Report “*A Smarter, More Secure America*”, published in 2007, articulated the new grand strategy to put America on a more solid footing to deal with global challenges under the banner of “smart power”: “*Our view, and the collective view of this commission, is that the United States must become a smarter power by investing once again in the global good - providing things that people and governments in all quarters of the world want but cannot attain in the absence of American leadership. By complementing U.S. military and economic might with greater investments in its soft power, America can build the framework it needs to tackle tough global challenges*²²”. The five key areas on which a “smart power” oriented foreign policy should be focused on as identified in the Report are: 1) partnership and alliances, 2) global development starting with public health, 3) public diplomacy, 4) economic integration and 5) technology and innovation²³.

The ideas promoted by the CSIS Report have obviously reached the new Administration because “smart power” has become the core principle of Obama’s foreign policy. The official announcement of the endorsement of “smart power” strategy was made on January 13, 2009, by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her Confirmation Hearing to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “*I speak often of smart power because it is so central to our thinking and our decision-making. It means the intelligent use of all means at our disposal, including our ability to convene and connect. It means our economic and military strength; our capacity for entrepreneurship and innovation; and the ability and credibility of our new President and his team. It also means the application of old-fashioned common sense in policymaking. It’s a blend of principle and pragmatism*²⁴”. In order to facilitate the implementation of a “smart power” strategy Clinton called for a reform of the state institutions, traditionally dominated by the Department of Defence that absorbs a huge budget (700 billion \$ for FY 2010), so as to strengthen the role of the civil institutions such as the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The underlying principles of this reform were defined in January 2010 in the First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) entitled “*Leading through Civilian Power*”. The Review calls for the implementation of a “smart public diplomacy” strategy based on “civilian power” defined as “*the combined force of women*

²⁰ Joseph Nye, “Get Smart. Combining Hard and Soft Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009.

²¹ See Joseph Nye and Richard Armitage, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter More Secure America*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007.

²² Joseph Nye and Richard Armitage, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter More Secure America*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 5.

²⁴ “Transcript of Hillary Clinton’s Confirmation Hearing to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 13, 2009.

*and men across the US government who are practicing diplomacy, implementing development projects, strengthening alliances and partnerships, preventing and responding to crises and conflict, and advancing America's core interests: security, prosperity, universal values – especially democracy and human rights – and a just international order*²⁵”.

From the above made analysis, it is obvious that “smart power” has become the core principle of Obama’s foreign policy, and that the Presidential team advocates a “smart power” strategy. Most recently, we have seen the implementation of this strategy in the case of the US engagement in the war in Libya where the US intervention was defined by President Obama as “humanitarian” (as integrated in an international coalition that was authorized by the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to intervene in Libya in the name of the “responsibility to protect”) and “limited” (in the sense of “burden sharing”, meaning that the USA will not act alone but share the responsibility with the other states participating in the coalition). Thus the new form of American leadership can be defined as “broader” and “smarter leadership” in so far as the role of the USA will be to mobilize the international community for collective action. Regarding the case of Libya, the US action could also be qualified as quite pragmatic in the sense that Washington let France and Great Britain take the initiative for the military intervention. As put by Obama, “*American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well, to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all*”²⁶.

By implementing a “smart power” foreign policy strategy, the goal of Obama Administration is not only to strike a new balance between defence and diplomacy (two of the key priorities of today’s US foreign and security policy) but also to integrate development as a third pillar to the three “Ds” of Obama’s foreign policy doctrine - defence, diplomacy and development. Obama’s will to strengthen the development pillar has most recently become evident in the announcement of an economic plan in his *2011 May Speech on the Middle East and North Africa* aimed at stabilizing economically and politically the region.

Obama’s smart foreign policy strategy has obviously been put into action, so we are now waiting for the results.

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